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# Due Distinction: Elite Student Status Hierarchies In China

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# Due Distinction: Elite Student Status Hierarchies In China

## **Abstract**

How do students sort each other into different status groups in school? Research primarily conducted in the United States conceptualizes student status hierarchies as multidimensional systems. Scholars portray multidimensional status systems as exclusionary, constructed by and in the best interests of high status students, and disconnected from adult society. However, these theories are less useful for understanding a unidimensional status hierarchy that determines student status based on a single dimension. This study challenges several assumptions based on multidimensional status hierarchies about status hierarchies by providing insights into how unidimensional status hierarchies are constructed, maintained, and justified. Data for this study come from 15 months of ethnography and interviews with 36 socioeconomically elite students, parents, and teachers at six top performing high schools in Beijing. First, I found that Chinese high school students established a unidimensional status hierarchy based solely on test scores, with the students who achieved the highest test scores on daily practice tests having the highest status. Students sorted each other into four status groups: Intellectuals (Xueshen), Studyholics (Xueba), Underachievers (Xuezha), and Losers (Xueruo). This status hierarchy dominated the school. All of the students recognized it as a legitimate basis for according status. Rather than the status hierarchy serving exclusionary purposes by restricting friendships between students from different status groups, students formed inclusive social associations without attention to status because associations did not threaten the status quo. Second, while literature emphasizes the motivation of high status students to maintain the status hierarchy, I observed that both high and low status Chinese students upheld the hierarchy. Finally, scholars imply that the status hierarchies that govern adolescent society are disconnected from adult society, yet in this study, I observed that teachers and parents supported the student status hierarchy and students believed that school status predicted adult status. The findings from this study underscore the need to improve current conceptual models of the nature of status hierarchies and the factors that facilitate the allocation of people into different status groups. While I use the example of elite Chinese adolescents, the findings carry implications for unidimensional status hierarchies among other social groups.

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DUE DISTINCTION: ELITE STUDENT STATUS HIERARCHIES IN CHINA

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## ABSTRACT

### DUE DISTINCTION: ELITE STUDENT STATUS HIERARCHIES IN CHINA

Yi-Lin Chiang

Annette Lareau

How do students sort each other into different status groups in school? Research primarily conducted in the United States conceptualizes student status hierarchies as multidimensional systems. Scholars portray multidimensional status systems as exclusionary, constructed by and in the best interests of high status students, and disconnected from adult society. However, these theories are less useful for understanding a unidimensional status hierarchy that determines student status based on a single dimension. This study challenges several assumptions based on multidimensional status hierarchies about status hierarchies by providing insights into how unidimensional status hierarchies are constructed, maintained, and justified. Data for this study come from 15 months of ethnography and interviews with 36 socioeconomically elite students, parents, and teachers at six top performing high schools in Beijing. First, I found that Chinese high school students established a unidimensional status hierarchy based solely on test scores, with the students who achieved the highest test scores on daily practice tests having the highest status. Students sorted each other into four status groups: Intellectuals (Xueshen), Studyholics (Xueba), Underachievers (Xuezha), and Losers (Xueruo). This status hierarchy dominated the school. All of the students recognized it as a legitimate basis for according status. Rather than the status hierarchy serving exclusionary purposes by restricting friendships between students from different status groups, students formed inclusive social



associations without attention to status because associations did not threaten the status quo. Second, while literature emphasizes the motivation of high status students to maintain the status hierarchy, I observed that both high and low status Chinese students upheld the hierarchy. Finally, scholars imply that the status hierarchies that govern adolescent society are disconnected from adult society, yet in this study, I observed that teachers and parents supported the student status hierarchy and students believed that school status predicted adult status. The findings from this study underscore the need to improve current conceptual models of the nature of status hierarchies and the factors that facilitate the allocation of people into different status groups. While I use the example of elite Chinese adolescents, the findings carry implications for unidimensional status hierarchies among other social groups.

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## INTRODUCTION

A teenager's status in the eyes of his or her peers is extremely important to most adolescents. Why this near obsession with status? It is because they have so little real economic or political power. ...They do, however, have on crucial kind of power: the power to create an informal social world in which they evaluate one another.

--Murray Milner, Jr. (2015:8).

No matter where we look, status is everywhere. It is in every group, from friendship circles to collegiate relationships, among politicians, athletes, artists, and certainly among students. Research shows that American students establish multidimensional status hierarchies in school based on school activities, teacher-student relationships, and peer associations (Eckert 1989; Eder and Kinney 1995; Foley 1990; Milner 2015; Sweeting et al. 2011). Elite students are particularly attentive to the school status hierarchies and simultaneously mark status boundaries with various criteria, including cultural taste, physical attractiveness, athleticism, artistic talent, cohort seniority, embodied ease, and social associations among peers (Cookson and Persell 1985; Courtois 2013; Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009; Khan 2011; Mijs and Paille 2016). Since elite students simultaneously use multiple criteria to sort each other into different statuses, they create, sustain, and justify their eliteness through different dimensions. In his study of high school students at an elite boarding school, Gaztambide-Fernandez (2009) shows that the students assign highest value to top academic performance, but allow the less-than-top performers to claim elite status based on achievement in sports or art. This shows that, in a multidimensional status hierarchy, even if some elite students fail to establish themselves as having elite status in one aspect, they nonetheless stay elite through another.

However, by primarily examining multidimensional status hierarchies, theory fails to account for the construction, maintenance, and justification of another prominent type of status

system: a unidimensional one in which a single criterion defines the status system. In unidimensional status hierarchies, members of high and low status groups must accept that a single criterion determines one's position and discount achievements in all other characteristics. Some evidence suggests that affluent, elite students likely construct unidimensional status hierarchies in school. Demerath (2009) finds that high school students in affluent neighborhoods engage in a "culture of competition" that propels them to strive for high academic performance.<sup>1</sup> Jiménez and Horowitz (2013) show that schools with large Asian immigrant populations amplify the importance of high academic performance in school to the point that it changes the pre-existing racial hierarchy in school. While these studies do not explicitly examine student status, they nonetheless imply the prominence of school hierarchies in which one factor, especially academic performance, is significant to the point that it determines student status in school. In these settings, social associations, cultural capital, and other criteria that theories have traditionally regarded as key markers of elite student status are largely inconsequential. Yet, these studies do not develop the notion that some status hierarchies are unidimensional rather than multidimensional.

With its distinctive rules that govern the allocation of status, unidimensional status hierarchies pose a considerable challenge to status theories derived from multidimensional ones. Unidimensional status hierarchies have status principals that differ from multidimensional ones, such as subordinate groups that are superior to dominant groups in all non-dominant criteria remain subordinate, or that members cannot attribute status differences to other

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<sup>1</sup> Demerath does not discuss students' associations among peers. Instead of assuming that this is the result of simple neglect, I would argue that this is likely because, when academic competition consumes (almost) all of students' time and energy, social associations is rendered inconsequential to student life in school and hence the author's inattention.

factors.<sup>2</sup> When even the highest achievements in non-dominant criteria have no value, members in unidimensional status hierarchies must develop specific behavior patterns and strategies to navigate the system that are different from how they would otherwise perform in a multidimensional status system. In addition to elite students, unidimensional status hierarchies are also common among other social groups. Three prominent examples are athletics, military, and royal families. Among elite athletes, one's elite status depends on the points scored in a given season. In the military, rank determines the status of each service person. In perhaps all royal families, bloodline is the key to ascending to the throne. Turning attention to the often-neglected unidimensional status hierarchies and showing empirically how such a system is constructed, sustained, and justified, is not only necessary for a comprehensive understanding of elite status distinction, but also complements existing status theories in general.

### **Multidimensional versus Unidimensional Status Hierarchies: Focusing on Adolescent Elites**

The multidimensional perspective has led to three weaknesses in the current literature. First, theories on status systems often focus on how the dominant group practices social exclusion, which led scholars to be over-attentive to examining social associations. Scholastic research emphasize that various types of elites (whether defined by prestige, honor, or socioeconomic status) practice social exclusion by disassociating themselves from non-elites.<sup>3</sup> In

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<sup>2</sup> An example of groups using other factors to explain for status differences is Lamont's (2000) study of different socioeconomic status groups who self-distinguished from others with morality. However, in a unidimensional status hierarchy, morality would be irrelevant. Since it is irrelevant, using the excuse that one's own group has higher morality would be insufficient to explaining the system. In fact, it might be such a distant concept that people would not even mention it.

<sup>3</sup> This approach is arguably a central piece in classical and contemporary status theories. Weber (1946) theorizes that each status group is a community and high status groups exclude others from freely accessing certain goods. Weber further attributes monopoly in the market to a dominant status group's total exclusion of other groups. Bourdieu's (1984, 1986) social reproduction theory hypothesizes that



fact, the role of social associations and its exclusionary purpose is so significant that Milner (1994, 2013, 2015) considers it a foundation for any status hierarchy.<sup>4</sup> Studies of adolescent elites confirm Milner's theory and find that elite high school students indeed rely on social associations to mark distinction. A common observed exclusion practice is that high status students often refuse to engage peers from low status groups, such as sitting or dining together, despite sharing the same campus throughout high school.<sup>5</sup>

I argue that unidimensional status hierarchies challenge the theoretical assumption that exclusion practices, as reflected by restricted social associations, are critical for elite status distinction. By rewarding only one characteristic (and assuming that characteristic is not social associations), elites must demonstrate their eliteness in that specific characteristic. Because social exclusion and inclusion cannot substitute for the lack of valued criterion to other members and that one's possession of the valued criterion cannot be transmitted to others,

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social closure and exclusion practices are key to social reproduction and the intergenerational transmission of privilege. Lamont (2002) shows that different socioeconomic classes construct moral, cultural, and economic boundaries to self-distinguish from other socioeconomic classes. Using the examples of American and Indian adolescents, Milner (2015) argues that peers differentiate each other according to social groups and do not mingle with members from lesser status groups. Eckert (1989) shows how students' status exclusion turns into geographic boundaries. Members in different status groups do not interact in school, nor do they share a common courtyard on campus. Turning attention to studies that exclusively examine elite students, Khan (2011) and Gaztambide-Fernandez (2009) show that elite students regularly exercise exclusion. Among these theories, a common theme is that the dominant/elite group excludes non-elites to maintain their privilege derived from high status.

<sup>4</sup> The other foundation is social conformation. The importance of social conformation is demonstrated in at least two ways: First, students must conform to group practices in general. Second, high status students take the lead in creating demonstrations or behavior patterns that other students seek to mimic. Yet, to stay high status, these trendsetters must constantly create new "fashion" so that low status students can try to but cannot catch up.

<sup>5</sup> Weis et al. (2014) find that elite students are a group of friends who go through the same (AP) courses and who self-distinguish from non-elites, whom they call the "normal people." Gaztambide-Fernandez (2009) shows that students in high status groups do not mingle with peers in low status groups, despite sharing the same campus for the entire high school. Examining friendship patterns among children, Eder and Hallinan (1978) show that children move between dyadic and triad relationships over time. However, for girls, changes are temporary turbulence as they return to dyadic relationships. Even for boys, group expansion primarily takes place within a strata rather than across strata.

social associations become irrelevant to positions in the status hierarchy. When social associations do not threaten existing status hierarchy, exclusion and inclusion practices play a limited role in maintaining the status system. In his study of affluent, competitive high school students in the U.S., Demerath (2009) briefly mentions the role of friendship networks. Similarly, in empirical studies of Chinese high school students, Kipnis (2011) and Fong (2004) hardly discuss peer networks among the Chinese high school students they studied. While the inattention to peer groups may be due to the authors' choice of emphasis, this inattention also comes from the possibility that, when one criterion such as academic competition consumes (almost) all of students' time and energy, social associations and exclusion/inclusion practices are unimportant to student life in school.

Second, the multidimensional perspective emphasizes the interest of high status groups in maintaining the status hierarchies (Berger et al. 1998; Milner 2015; Ridgeway 2001; Ridgeway 2014). Education is an important mechanism through which elite students maintain status hierarchies that benefit themselves.<sup>6</sup> Scholars observe that high status students are the main actors in upholding the status hierarchies in school and actively discourage others from claiming (illegitimate) elite status.<sup>7</sup> Yet, while the dominant group is logically motivated to maintain their privilege, to sustain any status system, the low status group also needs to support the system

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<sup>6</sup> The idea that education is a mechanism for status attainment and sustained inequality is long-standing. Weber (1946) argues that educational testing and selection creates a system of stratification. Turner's (1960) discussion of how elites select pupils into sponsored systems is an example of elite dominance. While educational systems are rarely a prototype of sponsored mobility, status attainment theories emphasize that educational selection is a crucial step towards social reproduction in various societies (Shavit and Blossfeld 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Khan (2011) gives an example of high status students badmouthing a student and claiming the student was not real elite. Gaztambide-Fernandez (2009) provides a story of how a high status girl lectures a low status student about his inappropriate behavior, which was against the rules of the status hierarchy.

that disadvantages them (Gould 2002; Ridgeway 2001).<sup>8</sup> Some studies show that low status students contribute to sustaining the status system by unconsciously internalizing stigma and behaving accordingly (Biernat & Kobrynowicz 1997).<sup>9</sup> Others suggest that low status students have a false hope of upward mobility, as they constantly try but will never catch up with the behavior and taste of high status students (Milner 2015). Alternatively, low status students might reject the status system and develop negative feelings against high status peers, thereby generating a sense of egalitarianism in other status criteria (Eder 1985).<sup>10</sup> However, with these few exceptions, scholars generally give limited attention to the role of low status members in sustaining status hierarchies.

By overemphasizing the dominance of high status members, studies insufficiently examine the nuances and crucial mechanisms that sustain status hierarchies. The role of low status students is particularly crucial in unidimensional status hierarchies because these students must support a criterion that determines their inferiority to high status students. As a result, rather than unconsciously internalize stigma, low status students might consciously

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<sup>8</sup> Ridgeway (2001) draws on the expectation state theory and argues that subordinate groups often misrecognize dominant group advantages as a group characteristic. In this process, the subordinate group develops stereotypes of the dominant group that legitimizes the status hierarchy.

<sup>9</sup> This is the perspective of the expectation states theory, which is applied to explaining subordinate group behaviors, such as racial minority's educational outcomes and interracial interactions in school (Biernat & Kobrynowicz 1997; Cohen 1982) and women's behavior and work evaluations (Ridgeway 2001; Ridgeway and Bourg 2004). In the theory, the mechanisms that sustain the reproduction of status systems include constraints in the sociocultural contexts, rewards, and evaluations connected to the belief that certain characteristics are intrinsic to group members (Correll and Ridgeway 2006; Kalkhoff and Thye 2006).

<sup>10</sup> The negative feeling can be so large that the high status group often encounter a cycle of popularity and may find themselves rather unpopular among peers in school (Eder 1985). Extracurricular activity participation also translates into different gains in popularity according to gender (Eder and Kinney 1995). These findings point to the distinction between status and popularity, which studies often treat as interchangeable concepts (such as Milner 2015; Mijs and Paulle 2016). Popularity also reflects the emphasis on social associations, meaning that popular students are those with whom peers want to associate. This is different from respect and admiration, which are closer to social honor (Weber 1946), and with which low status members have positive feelings towards high status members, but do not necessarily wish to be personally associated with them.

rationalize the hierarchy. Without alternative means for status acquisition, the structure and rules of status are clear and simple, making it harder for students to develop false hopes of upward mobility. Furthermore, since “other status criteria” do not exist in unidimensional status hierarchies, achieving equality in other aspects is meaningless for status purposes. For example, if the goal were to become a star musician, low status music majors would be better off practicing for music competitions alongside high status peers instead of trying to implement egalitarianism in other aspects such as standardizing performance outfits. In Chambliss’ (1989) study, Olympic swimmers are equally devoted to practice and mutually focus on time standards regardless of their relative status on the team.<sup>11</sup> In this unidimensional hierarchy as in others, low status groups must support the hierarchy while performing alongside high status groups. Research has yet to fully explore the critical support low status members provide in sustaining status hierarchies.

Third, by focusing on the relative importance of each criterion in elite student hierarchies,<sup>12</sup> studies portray adolescents as detached from adult society. Khan (2011) explains that elite students consistently overestimate each other’s eliteness because they fail to recognize the considerable gap between peers’ ability and social reality.<sup>13</sup> Eder (1985) argues

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<sup>11</sup> In Chambliss’ study, the mundanity of excellence is not the result of a few star athlete swimmers’ behavior, but the entire team’s. One can argue that the entire team is elite. Nevertheless, there are status differences among any social group, including an apparently equally elite group.

<sup>12</sup> Scholars that examine elite adolescent status hierarchies show that elite students simultaneously use various cultural markers to determine each other’s school status. These include a wide range of student behaviors ranging from degrees of participation in school activities, types of school activities, demonstrations of ease in any or all circumstances, interactional styles with teachers, to cultural taste demonstrated through purchased commodities. Most of these are seen as various forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). While studies usually measure cultural capital as high cultural participation (such as DiMaggio 1982), Lareau and colleagues argue for examining multiple types of cultural capital in education research (Lamont and Lareau 1988; Lareau 2015; Lareau and Weininger 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Khan gives the examples of himself and a student, Will. The elite students in his study mistakenly thought that people in their social network had talent unmatched by others. They rumored Khan to be an excellent violinist and squash player. They thought Will, who was simply a good squash player in a school

that adolescents generally do not understand that status is associated with interaction patterns as in adult society, and hence draw on criteria that are differently valued than those in adult society (also see Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009; Milner 2015).<sup>14</sup> The fact that certain behaviors discouraged in adult society are high status criteria among teenagers suggests teenagers have the ability to implement their own rules among themselves (Foley 1990).<sup>15</sup> Milner (2015) calls for greater integration of teenagers into adult civil society.<sup>16</sup> Together, literature suggests that teenagers live in what Coleman (1961) terms “the adolescent society,” where adolescents are in control and separated from the real, adult world.

Yet, this conceptualization of the adolescent world is inadequate. Students’ multidimensional status hierarchies share certain resemblance with those in adult society. For example, social associations and consumption taste are both important methods of elite distinction (Bourdieu 1984; Milner 2015). Athletic achievement is important for elite student status; it also influences students’ chances in college admissions (Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009; Stevens 2007). In unidimensional status hierarchies, students’ status criterion may especially

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with overall low squash ability in a country that was not competitive in squash, would win the junior Olympics. In both cases, these students “consistently overestimated just how talented the student population is” (2011:147). They gave the subject accelerated status and failed to understand that their elite student status, which was organized by internal competition in embodied cultural capital, was not the same in the real world.

<sup>14</sup> Eder (1985) finds that teenage girls establish status hierarchies in school by focusing on attractiveness and cheerleading. Eder and other studies’ finding, however, is clearly distinct from what Lamont (2000) or Treiman (2013) finds as the criteria that determine status among adults, in which cheerleading, appearances, and artistic talent do not determine female (or male) social status.

<sup>15</sup> Milner (2015) argues that adolescents’ peer interactions in front of adults have no meaning to peer relationships at school. He shows that a student might pretend to get along with a lower-status student in the presence of both parents. However, as soon as the parents are gone, the high status student will stop interacting with the other student. In this sense, behavior that approved by parents often carry little meaning in the adolescent society. Foley (1990) shows more specifically that teenagers engage in “making out games,” in which defying teachers, a behavior frowned upon by adults, in fact bestows status on the student among his or her peers. These are both examples that show how the adolescent social world is a separate entity from the real, adult-dominated world.

<sup>16</sup> Milner calls for the need to “integrate young people into adult civil society rather than exile them to some youth culture” (2015: 212).

strongly reflect adult emphasis because the selection of dominant criterion is crucial to all. Students likely choose to glorify the criterion that adults convey are most crucial for elite status. While students are ambivalent if not hostile to teachers<sup>17</sup> and typically omit parents from the analysis (Cookson and Persell 1985; Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009; Khan 2011),<sup>18</sup> adolescents remain under adult supervision. Teachers have the power to alter student status in classrooms (Cohen and Lotan 1995).<sup>19</sup> Parental involvement affects children's schooling experiences and outcomes (Lareau 2011). These findings highlight that students do not live in an alternate universe. Instead, parents and teachers, who are representatives of adult society, can play a direct role in shaping student status hierarchies.

In sum, studies have examined the creation of multidimensional status hierarchies through social exclusion, the ways that high status groups maintain dominance, as well as the peculiarities of adolescent status hierarchies. Yet, some status hierarchies are unidimensional and have distinct guidelines that govern status acquisition. Research needs to more directly conceptualize and better understand the nature of unidimensional systems. Given their distinctly different processes from multidimensional status hierarchies, it is necessary to examine the ways in which these systems are established, sustained, and justified.

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<sup>17</sup> Scholars often describe student-teacher relationships as parallel to that of worker-manager and emphasize that teachers and students occupy opposing structural positions in school (Coleman 1961; Foley 1991; McFarland 2001, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> This is likely because most studies on elite students in the U.S. took place in boarding schools. Studies that do not examine boarding school students reduce parental roles to inputs of class-based resources, such as supporting students' appearances and fashion (Berry 2016; Stevens 2007), cultivating athletic ability in childhood (Friedman 2013), or giving children pocket money (Sweeting et al. 2011). These studies, however, focus on static measures of family background during adolescence or latent effects of parental involvement during childhood. As a result, they do not show the mechanisms nor processes through which parents shape adolescent children's status in school.

<sup>19</sup> Cohen and Lotan (1995) give an example of a teacher changing a student's school status and subsequent performance by praising the student. One limitation of this is study examines elementary students, whether high school teachers have similar degrees of power to influence student status hierarchies is unclear.

## **Adolescent Elites in China and Their Unidimensional Status Hierarchy**

Using the example of a unidimensional status hierarchy among adolescent elites in China, I show empirically that status systems are established, sustained, and justified in ways not entirely predicted by status theories. Data for this study comes from ethnographic observations and interviews with elite, top performing high school students in Beijing. Between 2012 and 2014, I regularly observed eight classrooms in two schools, which I call Capital and Pinnacle. I also carried out home observations with four families. To situate students in their larger context, I conducted in-depth interviews with a total of 36 students, their homeroom teachers, and parents across six top performing high schools. The students are elite based on their family's socioeconomic background. Having gone through exam selection into top high schools, the adolescents I followed are a group of high performing students who aspire to attend top universities in China and the U.S. (I describe methodological details, elite definition, and Chinese educational context in detail in the next chapter).

The elite students in this study constructed a unidimensional status hierarchy in their respective schools. In all the schools I visited, test scores, which students used interchangeably with grades or GPA, determined student status.<sup>20</sup> Students publicly compare each other's test scores, compete to get into top colleges by achieving the highest possible test scores, and define status with it. Like multidimensional status hierarchies, the adolescent status system in China I observed was strongly hierarchical, had clearly defined status groups, and students agreed upon each other's position in the hierarchy. However, unlike multidimensional status hierarchies, characteristics unrelated to test scores were either secondary or irrelevant to the maintenance

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<sup>20</sup> Students' grades in school were largely the summary of test scores they took in the classroom.

of the status hierarchy. Contradictory to what theory hypothesizes, social associations had minimal or no impact on student status. The students I observed freely associated with peers in other status groups. The low status students regularly dined and hung out with high status students. High status students identified low status students as their best friends in school. Students rarely dated, but the few that I observed were primarily cross-status relationships. In this unidimensional status hierarchy, test scores were so decisive of status that even the strongest ties posed no threat to the existing hierarchy. In other words, the structure of such a unidimensional status system was not governed by principals of social exclusion or inclusion, but by each member's performance of the dominant criterion.

The high status elite students indeed enjoyed many benefits and seek to legitimize the status system. Yet, despite the disadvantages associated with low status, the low status elite students in my study were some of the strongest supporters of the school status hierarchies. Unlike what earlier studies in multidimensional status systems find,<sup>21</sup> students across status groups had positive feelings towards higher status peers. Despite constantly and publicly comparing oneself to peers with top status, students with less-than-top status expressed admiration for the top status peers, wanting to "be like" the top status students, and generally accepted their status positions. Furthermore, students of all status groups justified the system by arguing that differences in test scores reflected differences in innate ability. In some instances, the low status students were particularly fervent about the genetic argument when self-distinguishing from peers at the bottom of the status hierarchy. These behaviors upheld the value of test scores and continued depreciation of other characteristics, thereby sustaining the

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<sup>21</sup> Eder (1985) and Foley (1990) show that there are negative sentiments toward peers that stand out, whether in social activities or academic diligence. Mihs and Paulle (2016) show that students in Holland need to act mediocre to avoid negative labeling from peers.



unidimensional status hierarchy. The unidimensional status hierarchy among elite students in Beijing was not maintained through a top-down structure in which the high status students orchestrated and justified the status hierarchy. Rather, all members contributed to building, supporting, and defending the hierarchy.

Unlike the independent, autonomous portrayal of adolescents, I show that students are attentive to realities in the adult world. Students using test scores as the foundation of a unidimensional status hierarchy in school was not an arbitrary choice, but one that closely reflected the adult emphasis. The elite students in my study understood that achieving high test scores and top college admissions provides individuals with tangible and intangible benefits. In the words of two students, test scores in school are comparable to money in society, and research supports a literal interpretation of this analogy.<sup>22</sup> Consequentially, by constructing a test-score based status system and sustaining it on a daily basis, the students are in fact reflecting on social inequality and complying with social expectations. I also find that parents and teachers, as key adults who convey social expectation to students, directly contributed to sustaining and legitimizing the student status hierarchy. Teachers and parents granted favors to high status students, while low status students developed a sense of constraint. Adults' differential treatment to students based on test scores and hence school status legitimized the adolescent status system by offering society's stamp of approval on the student hierarchy and sustained the system by associating school status with everyday privilege.

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<sup>22</sup> Their comparison is similar to research findings. Li et al. (2012) show the wage premium among elite college graduates is almost entirely explained by top college attainment. Li and Zhang (2011) find that college GPA is significantly associated with employment opportunities and employment in higher paying firms. Wu and Xie (2013) explain that the wage gap between educated and less-educated workers is the result of selection of workers into the labor market.

## Studying Elite Students in China

Studies on elite students are rare. To my knowledge, this project is the first that examines socioeconomic elite students in China. Theoretically, elites are highly attentive to marking status distinction and students are prone to focus on differentiating school status. Elite students thus provide the opportunity to examine a status hierarchy that members systematically defend and legitimize, and one that carries significant meaning to the members within the system. I focus on the example of China because of the collective emphasis on college applications. Scholars show that high school students in China focus on preparing for the National College Entrance Exam, colloquially called the *gaokao*. Scholars have documented the strong educational desire that pervades the nation, parental devotion to the exam-taking child, and the history and structure of the exam system in China (Davey et al. 2007; Fong 2004; Kipnis 2011; Wang and Ross 2010). The mutual focus pertains to students in elite schools or non-elite schools as well as those residing in urban or rural areas (Fong 2004; Kipnis 2011). Even vocational students who do not aspire to go to college often find themselves held against their predicted exam outcome (Woronov 2016).<sup>23</sup> Having a clear context of singular emphasis, elite students in China are particularly likely to create a unidimensional status system that has rigid status boundaries.

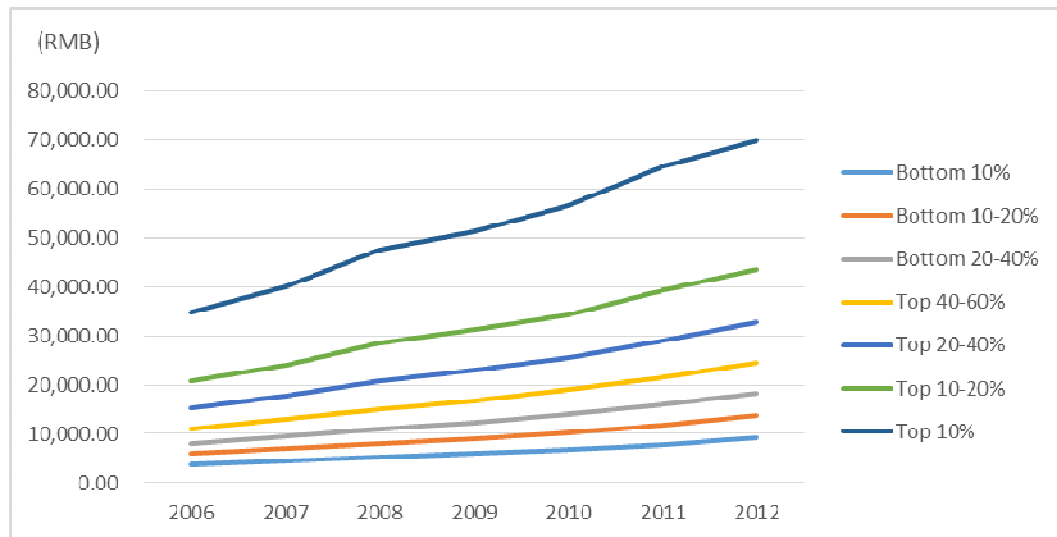
The socioeconomic elites in China are a sociologically interesting group that have received insufficient attention. While studies typically define elites as a small group of politically powerful people, China's economic reform in the 1980s led to the rise of a group of new socioeconomic elites who achieved high status through educational success (Li and Bachman 1989; Walder et al. 2000; Zang 2001). Education plays an undoubtedly crucial role in

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<sup>23</sup> Woronov (2016) shows that, since vocational students are not academically competitive, these students are often labeled as "failures" in China.

determining elite status in the post-reform era. For example, one's level of education has become a strong predictor of entry into both the political and economic elite in the country (Chen 2006). Having parents who achieved upward mobility through educational success and who expect children's admission to top colleges as a first step of future elite status, Chinese elite adolescents are among the first generation to have grown up in stable, revolution-free society. These students are the first generation who pursues exam success not as part of upward mobility, but for intergenerational status reproduction. The participants in this study also represent the educational experiences of the upper end of the social spectrum in an increasingly unequal Chinese society (Xie and Zhou 2014), where the income gap between the top 10% and others has considerably grown (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Distribution of Per Capita Income in Urban China, 2006-2012**



Source: National Bureau of Statistics (China).

The unidimensional status hierarchy I observed among elite Chinese high school students, in which test scores takes precedence over all other student characteristics, may be unfamiliar to scholars used to examining multidimensional status systems in American high

schools. Yet, test preparation is crucial to higher educational selection in most countries, including the U.S. Two-thirds of the OECD countries use exams to determine educational advancement (Furuta et al. 2016).<sup>24</sup> Even in the U.S., where universities select students based on well-rounded characteristics and downplay the importance of test scores among applicants (Karabel 2005), admission officers try to maximize the incoming cohorts' average SAT scores (Stevens 2007). In addition, the U.S. is already moving towards a system of large-scale standardized testing at levels of primary education. The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and its successor, the Every Student Succeeds Act (2010), both emphasize the use of standardized tests to determine students' grade advancement. Considering that students are tested into the next grade or higher education, academic performance likely occupy the minds of student in the U.S., China, and elsewhere. Chinese students establishing status hierarchies and sorting peers into status groups thus reflect a general social phenomenon that is observable across cultures.

## **Chapter Layout**

The following chapters contextualize the construction and features of elite students' unidimensional status hierarchy. I describe the system, provide student narratives of their understanding of the system, and show the role of key adults in supporting the system. Each chapter answers some overarching questions: How do students sort each other into different status groups? How do students rationalize the hierarchy? What are the benefits of having high status? What are the roles of teachers and of parents? What do parents do when a child is at risk of downward mobility in the hierarchy?

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<sup>24</sup> Universities in Chile, India, Israel, Turkey, and all East Asian societies select students based on exam scores. Students in Canada and Germany compete with grades for university admission. In France, where the public system do not rely on exams for college admission, the Grandes Écoles rank and admit students by their exam scores.

Chapter 1 describes the unidimensional Chinese educational system, where the curriculum and especially status hierarchies are organized around student performance in tests. I provide details of the school contexts, methodology for this study, and my definition of elites. I show the process students must go through to enter college, activities in school, and the college application process. Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 demonstrate the centrality of test scores among elite students in top high schools. In these two chapters, I respectively examine the daily lives of elite students preparing for college in China and the U.S. Students aiming for top universities in China enrolled in the domestic department; students who aimed for American universities enrolled in the international department. I show that, in both departments, test scores were at the center of student attention and were public information with which students competed on a regular basis. Using triangulated data from interviews with students, teachers, and parents, I provide a holistic picture of student-school-family relationships, all of which centered on students' test scores. For example, parents were not involved in school because they trust teachers were experts who could best help children prepare for top universities. In this context, key adults and students shared both focus on test scores and made it a natural choice upon which to construct a unidimensional status hierarchy.

Chapter 4 describes the school status hierarchy and student justifications of the system. I examine the setup of the hierarchy, the reliance on test scores and depreciation of other characteristics, and student justifications of the system. I present data from school observations and interviews with students to analyze how students sorted one another into one of the four status groups: Intellectuals (*Xueshen*), Studiaholics (*Xueba*), Underachievers (*Xuezha*), and Losers (*Xueruo*). I also demonstrate that high and low status did not restrict one's friendship network in school and that low status students often strongly admired their high status peers.

Students overlooked personal flaws of those with high status, but were unforgiving of low status peers who shared identical characteristics. The elite students in this study were highly attuned to the future. Drawing on interviews, I find that the students perceived school status as a predictor of future social status. They adopted an innate ability argument that justified peer status with unobserved characteristics. In this system, high status students were “born smarter,” while low status students were “naturally stupid.”

Chapter 5 and 6 shifts the attention from students to adults. I examine the role of teachers and parents in sustaining students’ unidimensional status hierarchy. In Chapter 5, I use observations of teacher-student interactions and interviews to show that high and low status students systematically received differential treatment in school. Teachers allowed high performers to swear, vandalize, and commit other disruptive behaviors in the classrooms and in school. By contrast, low performers did not dare to follow suit for fear of teachers reprimanding them. Chapter 6 focuses on the parents. While parents stayed on the outskirts of college preparation, they nonetheless contributed to sustaining the hierarchy at home. Parents fostered high performing children’s strong sense of entitlement, or a feeling of freedom, while low performing children were comparably constrained in their leisure activity choices and were frequently under higher degrees of parental supervision. Because school status and test scores were inseparable, teachers and parents interactions with students according to test scores were identical to privileging high status students. Consequentially, teachers and parents became external supporters of the student status hierarchy.

Chapter 7 additionally examines the role of parents as supporters of the hierarchy. Although parents primarily help sustain the system through differential treatment at home, they became heavily involved in school when children’s top college admission is at risk. Although

parents never explicitly reported their actions to be status-oriented, parents were clearly and primarily concerned with children's test scores and deployed strategies aimed at raising test scores. Because test scores almost completely determined school status, these parental involvements contributed to maintaining the student status hierarchy in school.

Combined with a conclusion and appendices, the seven chapters contribute to the sociology of education and research on status by studying elite adolescent status hierarchies as well as the adult actions that sustains status system. Although I only provide a snapshot of a moment in student's life course, transition to college is a life-defining event that is central to Chinese students' everyday life since young and is at the heart of families with college-bound children. The findings illuminate the features of a unidimensional status system, which is built upon the fundamental role of academic performance (test scores), in shaping dynamics of status distinction. Studies show that elite students often draw on various family-based characteristics, such as cultural capital, to mark distinction in school. While the students I followed focused on individual performances (test scores), test scores are highly associated with family background and the overrepresentation of elite students in top high schools reflect this class-based selection. Using test scores as the only criterion is thus another way of dividing peers according to their upbringings. In turn, as the students navigate school hierarchies, they misrecognize school status hierarchy as fair and learn to justify and defend a system of inequality in which they are privileged.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE SETTING: ELITE STUDENTS AND TOP SCHOOLS IN CHINA

## **An Overview of High School and College Educational Systems**

The Chinese educational system is a prototype of standardized, test-based selection of pupils. While students go through test-based selection as early as after elementary school,<sup>25</sup> the first large scale standardized examination that students encounter is the High School Entrance Exam, with which students apply for high school. In China, public high schools have higher admission cutoff scores and are more prestigious than private schools. Public schools are not ranked officially. Instead, they only differ in whether they are “key-point” high schools. Key-point high schools receive more government funding, have higher admission cutoff scores, and are more successful in sending students to college than other high schools. Unofficially, however, the public make detailed rankings of all high schools based on admission cutoff scores each year and define only the most selective key point high schools as top high schools.

Most students attend high schools in their district unless a school elsewhere is vastly better than the ones close to home. Very few students transfer during high school. Those who do are either top performing so that any school would be glad to have them, or their families have government affiliations and the transfer is part of the parents’ job relocation. Another way to get into a key-point high school is through sponsorship. Students who narrowly miss the admission cutoff (by one or two points out of 580) could purchase admission by paying a

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<sup>25</sup> Individual schools screen pupils with tests as early as middle school. While elementary selection primarily depends on residential location or family donation, many middle schools use a combination of residential location, family donation, and especially cognitive tests to select students despite the government forbidding non-secondary schools to screen students with tests. For example, schoolteachers reported that a top middle school in Beijing routinely screens applicants with questions for math Olympiad. Students in the study also said that they enrolled in the schools I visited after failing the screening tests for that school.



sponsorship fee to the school. Sponsoring is a government-approved practice and has a set of amount guidelines, with top high schools typically charging more than other schools.<sup>26</sup>

Academic high school students in China share a national curriculum, meaning that students across China share the same subject materials. While most academic high school students aspire to go to college, about half of the students in the nation attend vocational high school that prepares them for work. Yet, selection into the vocational track depends not on student interest, but primarily on their scores in the High School Entrance Exam. A common reason for students to attend vocational high schools is that their scores in the exam are so low that they fail to get in to an academic-oriented high school (Hansen 2015; Woronov 2016).<sup>27</sup>

After high school, students apply for college with their exam scores in the National College Entrance Exam (*gaokao*). The *gaokao* is a nation-wide two-day standardized examination held annually on June 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>.<sup>28</sup> The exam consists of six subjects: Chinese, math, English, and either humanities (geography, history, and politics) or sciences (biology, chemistry, and physics). Students are ranked by their test scores and receive only one admission offer based on their rankings (see Davey et al. 2007 for a more detailed description of the exam process). Like the high schools, public universities are more prestigious than private ones, and the public pays close attention to each university's admission cutoff score every year. Officially, the government selects certain universities in China as top-tier and heavily invests in these

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<sup>26</sup> The government canceled this policy in 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Vocational students also find themselves constantly undergoing test-based evaluations throughout high school (Woronov 2016).

<sup>28</sup> Provinces do not share the same set of exam questions, but the exam structure and schedule are typically the same in the country. With the exception of 10 provinces that hold the exam over 3 days, all others hold the exam in two days.

institutions (Rhoads et al. 2014).<sup>29</sup> But unlike the high school system, universities cannot take sponsorships and are constantly under scrutiny against potential illegal admissions.

Distribution of top-tier universities in the nation is unequal. No matter the policy or government selection of top-tier universities, Beijing consistently claims about one-fifth of the selected universities, while some provinces have none.<sup>30</sup> Because universities give more admission quotas to locals than students from other provinces, regional inequality in higher educational opportunities is substantial. Family background is also strongly associated with top university admission. Scholars find that high parental education significantly increases children's chances of top university admission (Liu 2013). The wealthiest 20% in China account for approximately 30% of the students in higher education (Min 2004) and about 40% of the students in Peking University (a top university in China) have parents in government or party official positions (Liang et al. 2013). By comparison, rural students make up to 60% of the college student population, but only account for 20% of the students in top universities in Beijing (Liang 2013; People's Daily 2009).

While most Chinese students stay in China for higher education, approximately 1% of the high school students go abroad for college (China Education Online 2014b).<sup>31</sup> Even though relatively few students are international-bound, Chinese students have growing presence in western countries. Chinese students are the largest group of internationals and account for about one-third of foreign students on American campuses (John 2016). China is also the top

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<sup>29</sup> For example, the government selected top universities in the 211 Project, 985 Project, and the "Double Top University Plan."

<sup>30</sup> The government administered the "Double Top University Plan" and selected 42 universities in 2017. Among them, eight are in Beijing. However, three of the 42 were "B-tier" universities that made the list for regional balance purposes. Previously, among the 118 universities selected in the 211 Project, 26 of which are in Beijing. Among the 39 universities selected in the 985 Project, eight are in Beijing.

<sup>31</sup> In 2013, the total number of students taking the *gaokao* was 9.12 million. The amount of students going abroad for college the same year was 93,768 (China Education Online 2014b).

sending country for foreign students to universities in the U.K., where the number of Chinese students is greater than the next five countries combined (UK Council for International Student Affairs 2017).<sup>32</sup> Similarly, China is the top source country for international students in Canada and Australia (Department of Education and Training 2017; Statistics Canada 2016).

Students choose to pursue higher education in Western countries for various reasons, including hopes of wealth accumulation in global society (Fan 2016) and the belief that western education is preferable to a Chinese one (Lai 2012; Larmer 2014). Families often treat Western education as a backup plan for children's *gaokao* failure in China.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, many low performing students self-select out of the Chinese education system during high school. The government tried to curb high school programs that prepare students for foreign universities (Chen 2015). Yet, despite government efforts, reports suggest that as many as 80% of the wealthy Chinese plan to send children abroad for college or graduate degrees (China Citic Bank and Hurun Report 2014).

Sending children to the Western countries for college is costly. Students who hope to go abroad often attend the international departments that prepare them for western universities. Those who could not attend public high schools often attend private high schools that also prepare them to go abroad. While international departments share the same high school ranking with domestic departments, the ranking of the school is less important for the international-bound students, likely because much of the competition between student admission results are with private high schools that are not ranked. International departments

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<sup>32</sup> The next five top sending countries are Malaysia, U.S., India, Nigeria, and Germany.

<sup>33</sup> Many students fail to attend their dream schools in China despite their best effort. Those who refuse to attend their admitted university and who are unwilling to retake the exam could apply for accredited programs set up by foreign universities in China (Davey et al. 2007) or directly apply to American, Australian, British, Canadian, or French universities that accept *gaokao* exam scores.

in Beijing charge an average of approximately \$15,000 each year, which is well over 100 times the tuition for domestic departments that prepare students for Chinese universities. After the child goes abroad, estimated expenses for American universities are over \$50,000 each year. Considering that the top 10% income for a family of three in urban China is approximately \$33,000 (see Figure 1), the ability to pursue western higher education is necessarily restricted to wealthy families.

#### *Benefits of Top University Attainment*

College education was not always strongly associated with elite status in China. During the Cultural Revolution, political affiliation had strongest impact on status outcome (Walder et al. 2000). However, after the Cultural Revolution, the government reinstated the national entrance exam as the main criterion for college attendance and carried out a series of educational reforms that drastically changed the higher education landscape (see Hannum 1999; Pepper 1996). One policy was the implementation of higher education expansion in 1998, after which college enrollment rates rapidly increased from 7% in 1998 to 24% in 2010 (Yeung 2013). Despite the expansion, college attainment continues to yield significant income returns (Heckman and Li 2004; Li 2003; Wu and Xie 2003; Zhang et al. 2005) and is a prerequisite of economic and political elite status in the country (Chen 2006; Li and Bachman 1989; Walder et al. 2000; Zang 2001).

In China and elsewhere, top university attainment is particularly crucial for socioeconomic or political elite status (Hartmann 2007). Scholars often consider all top-tier universities as top universities. However, definitions of top universities often vary among the public. With many top-tier universities in the city, Beijingers only acknowledge Peking and Tsinghua Universities, the two highest ranked universities in China, as top universities.

Beijingers' narrow definition of top universities are in fact not without good reason, as Peking and Tsinghua University graduates enjoy tangible and intangible benefits compared to graduates from other (even top-tier) universities.

Students from Peking University (PKU) and Tsinghua University (THU) have over 95% employment rates upon college graduation (Peking University Student Career Center 2014; Tsinghua Career Center 2014). By contrast, the average employment rate for college students upon graduation in the nation is so low that government and scholars express concerns of over-education among the population (Bai 2006; Li et al. 2008; Sharma 2014). Among the employed graduates in the nation, those who attend top-tier universities report 26.4% higher monthly income than those from non-top-tier universities (Li, Meng, Shi, and Wu 2012). The starting salaries for Peking University (PKU) and Tsinghua University (THU) graduates reaches 50% more than that of the national average for college graduates (China Daily 2014; China Education Online 2014a). Top university attainment also entails access to powerful alumni network. PKU claims that they have the highest number of alumni who became political leaders, academicians, and billionaires of all universities in China (Peking University Recruitment Newsletter 2014). Furthermore, alumni from PKU and THU often occupy powerful positions in China. For example, Hu Jintao, Xi Jinping, and Li Keqiang, among others, are all PKU and THU alumni.

With regard to the internationally-bound students, perceptions of top universities in Western countries also differ. Many would consider that selective state universities count as top-tier. However, the socioeconomic elites in Beijing in this study only considered includes the Ivy League, Stanford, MIT, and private universities ranked in the top 30 in the *U.S. News* or Oxford and Cambridge in the U.K. as top universities. Although the participants knew of other universities, they often did not hold those institutions as equally prestigious.

While students who go to Western universities expect to yield favorable career and income returns upon graduation (see Fong 2004, 2011), some scholars point out that these aspirations are not all fulfilled. For example, the foreign-educated on average earn a similar wage with the domestically educated (China Education Online 2017; National Bureau of Statistics 2017), and few of the foreign-educated eventually rise to political power in China (Li 2006). These students also lose valuable connections in the country and have low rates of returns to parents' educational investment (Larmer 2014; Xinhua News 2015). Yet, others show that Western education has long-term pays off. Many of these students acquire elite status in non-political areas and acquire political power by building strong relationships or by offering policy advice to the political leaders in China (Li 2006). Despite their initial lack of local network, these returnees can build new connections when readjusting to the local context (Li, Zhang, Li, Zhou, and Zhang 2012).

More important, aggregated reports of student outcomes do not reflect the experiences of top Western university graduates. Scholars show that top-university graduates are high-skilled workers sought by national and provincial governments as well as enterprises: as high as 93% of them find employment six months of returning to China and over a quarter of them enjoy starting salaries that are about three times the national average (Hao and Welch 2012). Those who start their own companies often lead successful business ventures (Wang et al. 2011).

#### *Applying to and Getting in Top Universities*

In light of the perceived and actual benefits, competition for top universities is understandably fierce. Almost 40 percent *gaokao* takers are admitted to college (Sina 2014), but only about 0.08% of them are admitted to PKU or THU. The combined acceptance rates of PKU

and THU are lower than the admission rates to the Grandes Écoles in France (less than 5%) and comparable to the Ivy League acceptance rate if all of the high school seniors in the U.S. had applied (about 0.1%).<sup>34</sup>

In China, students test into high school, but the degree of competition also depends on the students' city or province. For example, to enroll in PKU or THU, the Beijinger needs to score in the top 1% in the city. In the same year, the Shandong student needs to score among the top 0.1%, and the Guangdong student needs to be among the top 0.03% in the province (Huawen 2017). Studies show that key-point high school attendance is associated with high chances of getting into a top university and the family background is no longer significant after controlling for attendance at key-point high schools (Ye 2015; Yeung 2013). In Beijing, a top high school boasted that about one-third of its students would attend PKU/THU, while another school nearby celebrated the one student admitted to PKU.

Faced with intensive competition, students focus on exam preparation throughout three years of high school. From the start of high school, students drop all extracurricular activities and spend up to 15 hours per day in school, or more specifically, in their classrooms, while teachers rotate between classes. As part of *gaokao* preparation, high school students take in-class tests, school-scheduled weekly tests, and mid- and end-of-semester tests every semester. In the third and last year of high school, students additionally take district mock exams, mocks exams in other districts, and the high school graduation exam. To hone student's test taking

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<sup>34</sup> I calculated the admission rates for PKU and THU by dividing the total number of admitted students in 2014 to the total number of test takers in the same year, as reported in the government website (China Education online) and PKU and THU websites. The admission rate for the Grandes écoles is a rough estimate taken from dividing the estimated total number of students in the Grandes écoles by total number of college students in France using information from the Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale website. The estimated admission rates for the Ivies comes from dividing the number of students accepted to the Ivy League by the total number of college freshmen in the U.S., using information from the National Center for Educational Statistics and the Ivy League university admission websites.

skills, teachers fit three years of exam materials into two years of lectures. The entire third year of high school then consists of only two types of activities: taking and then reviewing tests. When students are not in school, they participate in private tutoring, enroll in shadow education, or go to cram schools (Liu 2012; Zhang and Xie 2016). However, at least in this study, very few students in top high schools participate in these programs because their schoolteachers are the experts of the *gaokao*. In fact, they are often the *gaokao* givers and reviewers.

**Table 1. Extra Points Available for Beijing Students**

Type	Extra points in 2013	Extra points in 2014
1. Top band in the National High School Olympiad*	Guaranteed admission	10
2. Pass the University-specific additional test	Up to 60	Up to 60
3. Exemplary behavior+	20	10
4. Athletic achievement^	20	20
5. Ethnic minority	10	5
6. Principal's recommendation-	60	60
7. PKU and THU winter/spring camps for Olympiad contestants outside the top band in the Olympiad	Up to 60	Up to 60

*Note:* Each student can only receive one type of extra points.

\* In addition to giving 10 extra points, PKU and THU significantly lowered the admission cutoff score for these students in 2014. The extra points were abolished in 2015.

+ This is the “Three-good Student (*sanhao xuesheng*)” and was abolished in 2015.

^ The government steadily decreased the number of sports that qualify for extra points

- Peking and Tsinghua universities give different principal recommendation quotas for selected top high school in Beijing each year.

Simultaneously, students often must try to earn extra points that count toward the *gaokao*. Policies regarding the types and amount of extra points available vary by region and school. For example, students in Guangdong received up to 20 extra points for PKU in 2014, but Beijing students could earn up to 60. Some types of extra points are available only to students in top high schools, such as the Principal's recommendation and university camps held for



Olympiad contestants. Policies regarding extra points also change frequently, such that students who spend two years preparing for a type of extra points may find it suddenly abolished or less beneficial than previous years. Table 1 lists the types of extra points that the two cohorts of students in this study pursued in 2013 and 2014.

Another part of the college application process is submitting an application list of college-major choices. Most provinces allow students to submit their applications after receiving their *gaokao* results. Students then strategize about their university choices by counting the admission quotas to each university against their rankings in the province. However, Beijing and Shanghai ask students to submit applications before the *gaokao*.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, Beijing uses a complicated university-student matching system. In this system, students rank-order the five universities (and majors) they apply for. Each university has a different policy about how students should rank them on the application list and these policies change frequently. For example, PKU and other top universities only accept students who list it as the first choice. Some top-tier universities accept students who list them as second if the first choice is PKU or THU. A number of universities do not take in students who list them as third or lower choices. Many universities raise the admission cutoff scores (so-called “penalty points”) for students who do not put them as top choice. Admission timelines also vary. By the time a university sends a rejected student’s exam score to his or her next choice, the latter might have already given all of its offers and cannot admit the student despite him/her passing the admission cutoff score.

Competition for top Western universities, especially American ones, is also fierce and involves preparation throughout high school. Government statistics shows that Chinese

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<sup>35</sup> The system is called “Submission through Guessing” (猜分填报志愿 *caifen tianbao zhiyuan*). The application timeline in Beijing changed and allowed students to submit their choices after the *gaokao* in 2015. The same change took place in Shanghai in 2017.

students' average SAT scores increased, but admission rates to top American universities decreased (China Education Online 2017) and the estimated acceptance rate for Chinese applicants to the Ivy League is as low as 0.5% in 2016 (China Education Online 2016). While Chinese students understand that the U.S. uses different college selection criteria, students often approach the American system as if it were a standardized testing one and focused on the SAT. Preparing for and taking the SAT is time-consuming. Students frequently attend shadow education or SAT prep classes outside of school in hope of raising their SAT scores. Since students can participate in the SAT multiple times each year, they often make several trips to Singapore or Hong Kong and take the test until they obtain satisfactory results.

Simultaneously, while they focus on exam preparation, students participate in extracurricular activities for applications, albeit their time spent on extracurricular activities are little as necessary. Being aware that American universities look for indicators of students' leadership, schools have designated times for students to participate in activities that would help with college applications. Some schools even go so far as to organize field trips and community service programs for all international-bound students so that the students can write it in their application essays (Larmer 2014). School counselors play an important role in guiding students' application process. With the exception of a few Chinese teachers serving as counselors, most counselors in the international departments are impeccably credentialed professionals: they are usually former admission officers in American universities. These individuals have insider information about admission decisions and often have connections with various top universities that can facilitate student admission into those institutions (Cookson and Persell 1985; Stevens 2007).

Being the experts in college applications, school counselors often design application timelines that students must follow. College preparation begins in the first year (10<sup>th</sup> grade), when students enroll in a semester-long program that introduces them to the American college application system. Most of the college application activities take place in the second year (11<sup>th</sup> grade). In this year, students have up to 15 meetings with counselors per semester and take seminars on college applications. In the same year, students learn to use Naviance (a software used for college preparations), research potential colleges, attend college fairs on or off campus, finalize college lists, and complete application essays. In the summer leading to the last year (12<sup>th</sup> grade), students take all exams, including the TOEFL, IELTS, and SAT. Only after that will students have all materials at hand and allowed to apply for college. In the last year of high school, students then schedule frequent sessions with counselors to discuss college application outcomes or solicit letters. After submitting their applications, students take AP tests until high school graduation. These various activities easily fill up student schedules and give them plenty of things to do work on throughout three years of high school.

### **Definition of Elite**

Studies on adolescent elites often adopt different definitions that describe the group under examination. While no definition of status is perfect, I use a comprehensive measure of class background based on income and education. Specifically, I define elites as having college education and with top 10% income in urban China. In the late 1980s, which is the time when the parents in this study graduated high school, less than 3% of the college-aged population received higher education (National Bureau of Statistics 1991). Since about half of the population in China resides in rural areas, the top 10% urban income likely translates into top

5% income in the country. Studies of elite education have defined elite students based on academic prowess (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009) or exam performance (Kipnis 2011). However, these definitions do not adequately account for student and their families' future-orientation, nor do they sufficiently reflect the regional and family educational resources that shape student outcomes. Specifically, the ability to attend Western universities is heavily dependent on parental income and not students' academic performance. For these reasons, I choose to focus on the socioeconomic elites in this study.

### **Data and Methods: Ethnography, Interviews, and Social Media**

Since the creation, maintenance, and justification of status hierarchies is most clearly observed in the intricacies of everyday interaction, most of the data for this study comes from classroom observations. I conducted 15 months of ethnography in Beijing between 2012 and 2014 in two high schools that I call Capital and Pinnacle. I visited the two schools on an average of once a week and hung out with students on a regular basis. I carried out full-day classroom observations in eight classrooms, six in the domestic department and two in the international department. When I entered the schools, teachers introduced me to one student in each classroom. These eight students became my key informants through whom I befriended many of the 30-35 students in each classroom. I shadowed each of the key informants between eight to fifteen hours each day, up to five days.

During classroom observations, I sat at the back of the classrooms and jotted down notes. I later wrote detailed field notes describing the room setting, atmosphere, student conversations, and peer interactions. Toward the end of fieldwork, when the students became accustomed to my presence and without disrupting classroom activities, I typed detailed notes

during observations on my laptop. As part of my ethnography, I shared meals with the students, joined them for outings, attended school meetings, and accompanied them inside the exam locations on *gaokao* days. While I also hung out with many students in the classrooms, my focus remained on the key informants during observation.

I was able to conduct home observations with four of the eight key informants. Three boys and their families allowed me to visit on weekends; one girl's parents let me stay at their house for four days. Excluding the four-day stay over, I visited each of the boys three times, averaging three hours per visit. During home observations, I sat at the corner of the living room or a place where I could observe family interactions while posing minimal disturbance to their activities. I sketched down the apartment settings and took note of each family member's activity during observations. I also scribbled down family conversations and interactions during observations. Since inviting others to share meals are sometimes only polite gestures, I joined the families for lunch or dinner when the parents extended the invitation for a second or third time.

My role was that of a "big sister (*jiejie*)" to the students. Many of them regularly tested my knowledge about the *gaokao* and SAT vocabulary. Some expressed approval of my American accent and institutional affiliation (Penn). From their comments about my answers, they were likely trying to sort me into a status group. As a Taiwanese at an American institution, many students were interested in talking to me about Taiwanese pop culture and American higher education. Students also made sure that I abided by school regulations, such as not using a cell phone in school. Students' acceptance of me increased my confidence that the interactions I observed were routine. By immersing myself among the informants, I learned to recognize and gradually adopt their perspectives of the unidimensional status hierarchy.

I supplement my ethnographic data with in-depth, semi-structured interviews. I conducted 77 interviews with 36 students, 19 parents, and 24 teachers across six top high schools. Among the 36 student participants, 26 participated in individual interviews, 10 in four separate group interviews. Seeking a more comprehensive portrait of school status that accounts for change over time, I conducted follow up interviews with 14 students after they learned of their college placements. To examine how key adults might be involved in sustaining the student status hierarchy, I asked the students to introduce me to guardian parents and homeroom teachers for adult interviews. I interviewed 19 parents and 14 teachers/counselors who provided information for 28 students. Considering that elites are often difficult to recruit, schoolteachers and scholars have commented that my success rate in soliciting adult interviews is unusually high. The interviews took place at coffee shops, vacant classrooms, their offices, or other places they felt comfortable. Individual interviews averaged about 80 minutes; follow-up interviews were shorter and averaged approximately 40 minutes. I digitally recorded and transcribed all interviews.

In addition to ethnography and interviews, I also collected information from the media and social networking sites. These include college admission statistics in China, government notification of policy changes, school admission results, and university admission results. These information, although often containing students' personal information, are publicly available and served as verification for students' reported exam scores. For example, a student had neglected to mention how many extra points he received likely because his exam score was so high that he did not need the extra points. However, I came across a widely circulated list on student forums that contained students' names, schools, and extra points obtained for Peking and Tsinghua University. On the list, I saw that he received 40 extra points for the university he

later attended. Since every other student's reported extra points matched the information on the list, I included 40 extra points in this student's *gaokao* score. I also draw information from newspapers, education-focused magazines, and books published by high schools. Most of these printed documents boasted student achievement and/or school histories. These written documents and media reports provided me with information regarding how the schools presented its self-image as top in the nation, as well as student narratives of school life and exam preparation.

I communicate regularly with the participants through the internet and mobile devices throughout fieldwork I collected information that students shared through texts and voice messages and kept note of what student opinions expressed in emails, mobile apps such as Wechat, microblogging websites such as Weibo, and other social networking platforms. These multiple channels of communication allowed me to keep contact with them despite the geographical distance (across three continents) even well after I exited the field. In this study, all participants and schools are given pseudonyms; universities are changed into sister institutions.

#### *Participant Characteristics*

The students in this study are elite due to parents' high levels of education and high income.<sup>36</sup> The parents in this study are exceptionally highly educated. Many of these parents graduated from top universities. Some hold graduate degrees and have foreign exchange experiences. In China, wealthy families often underreport their total income and "grey income" may be significant among the families (Wang and Woo 2011). Nonetheless, the families in this study reported a median income that was almost twice the amount of a top 10% family of three

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<sup>36</sup> All but one student had at least one parent who attended college. I included the student in the sample because he was high performing and his family income was high.

in urban China. Another indicator of the families' affluence was that all but one confirmed that they could afford to send their child to a private university in the U.S. for four years.

In addition to high levels of education and income, the parents also had professional occupation, household registration (*hukou*), and affiliations associated with elite status. With regard to occupation, all but one student had at least one parent with upper-managerial or professional positions. Two-thirds of the student families have government or military affiliations. In China, one's household registration (*hukou*) conditions one's ability to access public goods and services. All of the students and their parents in this study have Beijing *hukou*. Most parents obtained Beijing *hukou* as part of their career benefits and the children are born with Beijing *hukou*. The exceptions include a student who obtained Beijing *hukou* and transferred to the city after his parents relocated to Beijing, and another who is at least a third generation Beijinger.

The elite students in this study were tested into top high schools and are very high performing. The teachers reported that most of the students go to top-tier universities each year, which is a reason for the participants in this study to consider only PKU and THU as top universities in China. A number of the students count not going in to PKU or THU as failing the *gaokao*. Similarly, those who pursue American universities are exceptionally high performing. In 2012, the median SAT score for Chinese students was 1200-1500 (out of 2400) and average in Beijing was 1455 (DK International Education 2013). By comparison, the lowest SAT score reported by students in this study was 2050. While students who scored 2050 were below average in the high schools I visited, they were in the top 5% in the U.S. as well as in China (China Education Online 2014b). Table A1 briefly summarizes the characteristics of the six



schools I visited. Table A2 provides information about the 36 student interviewees' characteristics, *gaokao* or SAT scores, and research participation.

### **Field Sites: Capital and Pinnacle**

Capital and Pinnacle both rank in the top 10 out of 291 academic high schools in the city and students need to score in the top 10% in the High School Entrance Exam to gain admission to either school. Capital is an up-and-coming school that drastically improved its ranking in Beijing; Pinnacle is a traditional top-performing high school that media refers to as “the god-like high school.” A demonstration of the schools' high status is by the reaction from taxi drivers. Upon hearing my destination, many drivers would talk during the entire 15-30min trip about how good the schools are and how they wish their child went to either. Those who assumed that I was a teacher frequently commented, “Wow, you must be really smart to teach at [Capital/Pinnacle]!”

Both Capital and Pinnacle offer domestic and international departments to prepare students for college in China and the U.S. The schools use ability grouping to distinguish one or two top performing classrooms in the domestic departments. This is not a practice in the international departments presumably because there are only two or three classrooms in the department to begin with. Students are deferential to teachers and overall teacher-student relationship is friendly and collaborative in both schools. The students share an identical curriculum, have the same schedules, and are highly competitive in test scores. Students also come from highly comparable backgrounds and most are socioeconomic elite. Teachers report that the average family income in the schools is about 1.5 times higher than the top 10% in urban China. A sizable portion of students in Pinnacle comes from military backgrounds likely

due to the school's proximity to military compounds. Capital has a history of catering to children of military cadres. While the school no longer selects students based on parental ranks in the military, many student families have military affiliations.

Capital is known for its vast schoolyards, where some 4,000 students (about half are middle school students) share a near-40 acre campus. Visitors walking through the security-guarded front gate will see a track field where the students gather every Monday morning for flag raising ceremonies. To the right of the track field is the international department, a newly renovated white building. The interior of the international department building is bright, clean, and colorful. In the lobby, lush green plants stretch tall on shiny white tiles that reflect the sunlight. Dozens of flags from countries round the world decorate each side of the wall. In the center is a world globe so big that its width is the size of two adults' outstretched arms. Toward the left, a large flat screen TV near the elevator announces school news, especially student achievements.

Classrooms are on upper floors of the international department building. Each classroom has large windows on one side, a wall-length blackboard at the front, two desktops at the back, a bookshelf on the right, and two teacher's desks at the front and back doors of the room. Each classroom contains about 30-40 white metal desks. Outside the classrooms, a giant world map is posted on the wall in the central hallway in the second floor. The map shows 16 universities in North America and Europe that are, presumably, the universities that students should apply for. The five universities in the U.S. are MIT, Stanford, Harvard, Princeton, and Yale, with Harvard bolded and in large font size. Across the Atlantic, University of Cambridge is in large font (but not bolded). Oxford, LSE, and others also made the list.

On the other side of campus, far away from the international department, is the domestic department. The two departments are separated by the track field, a park-size lawn with a stone pavilion, a school auditorium, and a gym. The domestic department consists of Capital's iconic five-story tall red brick buildings, one for each of the three high school cohorts. The buildings stand out on campus as they overlook a courtyard of trees. Students guess that the school modeled the buildings after Harvard campus. Inside, the buildings are bright with polished white floors that reflect the lights from the ceiling. Each building has a student study lounge for group discussion and self-study. While classrooms and hallways have beige-color tiles, the study lounges have squeaky redwood floors and dozens of five feet tall bluish-grey velvety sofa-chairs back to back, so that they make up about two dozen study booths.

Classrooms in the domestic department are identical to those in the international department, but homeroom teachers often decorate each classroom according to their field of expertise. For example, a biology teacher grew a row of plants on the windowsill and hung a human blood circulation diagram on the other side of the wall. An English teacher filled the bookshelf with English novels and dictionaries in her classroom, turning it into a mini library. In an austere classroom, a math teacher kept his measuring tools on the bookshelf, allowing students to fill the rest with their books and test papers. Capital installed lockers in the hallways for students to store their texts books and test papers, and some good friends often share a locker. On any ordinary day, the buildings are silent during class. While in break, student chatters fill the hallway as they meet and greet friends from other classrooms. They then return to their respective classrooms for the next class period or head to the cafeteria, a pink-colored building located at the back gate of the school. The cafeteria looks like an American food court, where students line up in front of vendors in different booths for various daily specials. Yet,

despite the apparent diversity of choices, many students dislike the food and complain about cuisine repetition.

Pinnacle has about 1500 students on its 15-acre campus. The main building in Pinnacle is a long, four-story tall white building immediately to the left behind the guarded school gate. Both the international and domestic departments are located in this building. In the lobby, “Pinnacle High School” is carved in dark red colors on one side of the light pink granite wall, half blocked by a baby grand piano and two tall bushes. Two dozen Chinese calligraphies decorate the other three sides of the wall. Student classrooms and teacher offices are on the second to fourth floors. The international department claims one end of the building, while the domestic department occupies most of the classrooms. Each international department classroom is equipped with a blackboard at the front, a flat screen TV on the side near the door, some bookshelves, and 25-30 sets of light-colored wooden desks and chairs. The sun shines gently through soft orange curtains into room.

Classrooms in the domestic department are unique and take the shape of a hexagon. Each classroom has four sets of windows, two adjacent sides to the left and two facing the hallway at the right. Approximately 30-35 students sit at their wooden desks in the sun-lit classrooms. The upper half of the wall is painted white, while the lower half is light blue. Each classroom has a blackboard, a small screen at the front, and a bulletin board on the back. Bulletin boards publicize student achievements and test scores. In the top performing classrooms, students have so many achievements that notices would fill up an entire wall. Other times, the bulletin board shows classroom leaders’ hand-written highlights of each subject that warn classmates of common mistakes in the exam. Around the end of 12<sup>th</sup> grade, teachers nail a list of the amount and source of extra points each student in the school received.

Classroom decoration is minimal in Pinnacle, but some teachers still put thought into decorations. A math teacher set up a small plastic Christmas tree at the corner of the blackboard in winter. The tree stayed there until the end of school year. In a Chinese language teacher's classroom, classic Chinese novels sporadically lay in the bookshelf under a huge calligraphy of the word "silence" on a piece of red paper. Pinnacle does not give student lockers, but instead decorate the hallways with slogans that encourage students to focus on exam preparation. For example, one Chinese calligraphy writes, "Create excellence in all aspects, achieve [your] goal in the *gaokao*, serve the country, repay [your] parents, and fulfill [your] occupational dream." The building is quiet both during class and in breaks. Few students stand in the hallways to chat, and those who do talk in hushed voices.

Across the main building is the cafeteria. Being smaller than the one in Capital, the Pinnacle cafeteria has about half of the options and can only seat half the student body at any given time. As a result, Pinnacle schedules different lunch times for each cohort. Beyond the main building and the cafeteria, a line of roadblocks prohibits vehicles from entering. Beyond the roadblock, the other part of campus consists of green lawns, a school library, science building, auditorium, administration offices, and the school's original school gate, which has become the gate to the track field where students gather every day for flag raising ceremonies or group exercises.

The beauty of Pinnacle campus lay in the area beyond the roadblocks, where traditional Chinese artifacts mix alongside modern-day concrete buildings. One would see a few courtyard houses (*siheyuan*) conveyed into offices. A stone bridge on a tiny artificial pond leads toward a pavilion surrounded by bamboos. A few steps away, large goldfish swim in circles in another slightly larger pond. Students often sit and read at a corridor hidden in lush green trees during

nice weather. The corridor connects two buildings and is decorated with quotes by Hegel and other philosophers. In one building, a set of Bianzhong<sup>37</sup> and a grand piano occupy two sides of the lobby. In another building, a ten-feet wide replica of an armillary sphere with four black stone-carved dragons supporting the hollow globes majestically sits at the center. Further toward the end of campus is a track field circled by iron fence. Beside the track field are some ping-pong tables and a monument showing teenagers playing tug of war.

In short, Capital demonstrates its elitism with geographic grandeur and amazes visitors with its open space, cosmopolitan-themed buildings, and bright colors. Pinnacle demonstrates its elitism with its architectural elegance and surprises visitors with high culture and historical artifacts on campus. Yet, despite these differences, students in both schools are comparable in both elite backgrounds and top academic performance. As I show later, the students focus on exam preparation and are highly competitive with test scores. Most important, students in Capital and Pinnacle construct a unidimensional status hierarchy and sort peers into identical status groups.

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<sup>37</sup> A type of ancient Chinese musical instrument that consists with a set of bronze bells.

## CHAPTER 2

### LIFE IN A TEST-OBSSESSED SYSTEM: PREPARING FOR THE GAOKAO IN CHINA

While elite student status hierarchies are often multidimensional and emphasize cultural repertoires (Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009; Khan 2011), unidimensional status hierarchies that is set up on a single criterion are also possible. Since no other criterion challenges its centrality, this criterion necessarily occupies the attention of all members. For the students in this study, the dominant criterion is test scores. This chapter, along with the next one, provides the contextual foundation of my argument. I briefly discuss how the *gaokao* has significance in the media, government, and neighborhoods. Then, I show that test scores lie at the center of student life and are at the focus of competition in school. While students are different, some are more popular, others more physically attractive than others, the evidence support the claim for a unidimensional system. I detail how teachers and parents also collectively focus on students' test scores. In this contest, students receive clear expectation signals from the environment and key adults. These elements in the society, neighborhood, and daily interactions support my claim that the status hierarchy is a unidimensional one based on test scores.

#### **Collective Focus on the *Gaokao***

The *gaokao* captures the attention of the public across the nation. Every year, a few months before the *gaokao*, netizens remind each other of that the exam is drawing nearby

tweeting memes about the *gaokao*. The tweets usually read, “The sequence of the Chinese annual large-scale production war epic film since 1978, hitting theaters on June 7 at 9AM.” The tweets include a poster of the imaginary film. The poster for the 2017 sequel shows the movie title, “*Gaokao*,” in blood-red colored calligraphy is at the center of the poster, while gruesome-looking teenagers stand in the background (see Figure 2). Later in summer, when *gaokao* results become public, media glorify the top-scoring students in each province or city. These students experience instant national fame. Newspapers publicize their life histories up to college enrollment, schools invite them to share exam tips with younger cohorts, and strangers tweet about them. Simultaneously, reporters write extensively about family sacrifices and top performers’ dedication to studying. Plenty of these stories tell about parents concealing grandparental illness so as not to distract the child’s exam preparation. Occasionally, a mother of a high performer would hide the father’s sudden death for the same reason.

**Figure 2. Meme of the National College Entrance Exam**





Another indicator of the significance of the *gaokao* is that local governments implement policies to assist families with exam-taking children during exam days. On the days leading to *gaokao*, Beijing Daily (the official Beijing Municipal newspaper) spends five pages (out of 40) listing government support to families participating in the *gaokao*. Some pages show the exam statistics in previous years. Other pages highlight the available public assistance. For example, families are allowed to park at police parking slots on exam days, roads around the exam sites are closed so that students will not be disturbed by traffic noise, and the police have orders to clear traffic for student families should they run late to the exam. Scattered throughout are warm reminders for parents about how to best take care of the exam-taking child, such as experts suggest having breakfast 60-90 minutes prior to the exam.

The *gaokao* and its preparation also shape neighborhood landscape. Cram schools (or shadow education) flourish near high schools. Private tutors set up offices nearby and offer a myriad of services. Neighborhoods with top high schools have elevated housing prices. Apartments closest to schools are never short of tenants because every new cohort consists of parents interested in minimizing children's commute. Units that once upon a time housed a top-performing student are especially lucrative assets, as landlords can double or triple rent for future residents. Since high schools are the *gaokao* test sites, neighborhoods experience an annual influx of visitors on exam days. These visitors include parents waiting outside the school, increased armed security at the school gate, police guarding closed roads, and an ambulance in front of the school. The residents do not seem to mind the recurrent hassle, but instead show support by setting up large signs asking each other to be quiet so as not to disturb the students on exam days each year.

Families are highly devoted to child's exam preparation. Family members, including extended family, focus attention on the test-taking child. Studies suggest that this common focus is not simply the result of the one child policy, but more so because the child is actively shouldering the family's educational desire (Wang and Fong 2009). Studies show that parents often willingly sacrifice themselves in the hope of increasing children's *gaokao* scores (Bradsher 2013b; Chiang and Lareau 2017; Fong 2016; Fong 2004; Heeter 2008; Kipnis 2011). For example, a documentary called "Senior Year" (Zhou 2017) shows parents in rural Fujian obediently nodding as the teacher lectures them to refrain from getting a divorce and that the *gaokao* is more important than winning the lottery. While the extent of parental sacrifice in this study may not be as great as in rural Fujian, I observed grandparents moving in to take care of the 12<sup>th</sup> grade child, cousins accompanying the child to exam sites, and fathers moving away to minimize distraction at home.

### **Test-Focused Activities in Domestic Departments**

While students in the international departments did not care for nor participate in the *gaokao*, the *gaokao* has overwhelming presence in domestic departments, where students prepare for Chinese universities. The domestic-bound students in this study often considered themselves to have been preparing for the *gaokao* since young. One of them was Na, a stellar student in Central High school. In our interview, I asked Na about her test preparation activities in school. Instead of giving a direct answer, she explained with a patient smile that *gaokao* preparation took much longer than as implied in my question.

"I've been studying for the *gaokao* since I was small." Na said in a hunchback position, "Chinese education is like making a gong—the last swing of the hammer decides the

sound. If you fail the *gaokao*, you'll feel that your over-a-decade of effort is [gone] (she made a gesture of a bubble bursting)." She looked me in the eye and continued, "I knew since I was in elementary school, way back then, that I'm definitely going to college. We don't really have any other way to go."

As Na simply and eloquently described, the *gaokao* results not only determine student outcomes, but also give meaning to "over a decade" of hard work, often starting as early as elementary school. Moreover, Na and her peers perceived the *gaokao* as the only option ("no other way to go"). This perception implies that students have focused attention on the *gaokao* and nothing else.

Students indeed spent almost all of their time preparing for the *gaokao*. In one of my first attempts to understand high school life in Beijing, I conducted a group interview with Mike, Xiangzu, Mingming, and Yawen, four 12<sup>th</sup> graders in Omega. Mike was applying for Canadian universities; the other three prepared for universities in China. When I asked them how much time they spent studying every day, the students looked at me as if I asked something bizarre.

Xiangzu: Do you mean in school or outside of school?

Yawen: If [you] mean in school, then at least 10 hours per day.

Xianzu: Basically every hour in school is used for exam preparation.

I tried to clarify the question by saying, "How about the total hours you spend on a regular school day?"

Mike: You might as well say 24 hours.

Mingming: That's not accurate. Don't you sleep?

Mike: Then 24 hours minus the time you sleep. (Rolls his eyes)

I then approached the same question from another angle by asking if they enjoyed any extracurricular activities. The group of friends first looked at each other, chuckled, and then responded sarcastically:

Yawen: What do you mean by “extracurricular activities”? (Sarcastically)

Xiangzu: Why would anyone have time for that? (Disapprovingly with a frown)

Mingming: We don’t even have enough time to sleep!

Mike: Yeah, we’re pretty much too sleep-deprived to do anything else.

To these students, “how much time one studies” and “what extracurricular activity one has” were uninformed questions that did not make sense because all activities prepared them for the *gaokao*.<sup>38</sup> Later, a teacher commented, “Preparing for the *gaokao* is a full time job.” The teacher’s statement was a literal description of students’ exclusive focus on and daily devotion to the *gaokao*. Specifically, for students aiming at PKU and THU, an hour awake was an hour of exam preparation.

School atmosphere in domestic departments were increasingly tense as the *gaokao* drew near, with the last year of high school (12<sup>th</sup> grade) being the height of exam preparation. A typical day in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade would unfold like this. Students arrived at school by 7:30am for the first test of the day. Capital reserved Monday mornings for flag raising ceremonies in the sports field, where the students lined up in front of a command post. Flag raising ceremonies were times when selected students boarded the command post to be publicly awarded for their achievements. Teachers expected students to focus on the ceremonies. But most students

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<sup>38</sup> I adopted these questions from a scholar who had interviewed students in top high schools in another Chinese society. The fact that the same question was feasible for another group of top performing Chinese students in East Asia but bizarre for the top performing Chinese students in this study shows the importance of context when designing interview questions.

secretly studied small pieces of exam preparation notes hidden in their pockets or sleeves and mechanically applauded those who, according to a student, “must have done something good.”

Classes started promptly at 8am. While 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade students took a few courses unrelated to the exam, such as Philosophy, 12<sup>th</sup> grade students only took exam subject courses and physical education. Classroom activities were a routine of students working on a test and teachers reviewing test questions. I learned quickly that if students took a test in one class, the next would be a review session, the one after that another test, then another review session, and so on. This pattern was consistent across subjects and schools that I visited. Students went through eight (or nine) classes every day with ten-minute breaks between classes and a one-hour lunch break in between. Pinnacle scheduled an extended break of 25 minutes every afternoon for flag-raising ceremonies, martial arts practice, or other announcements depending on the day of the week. Teachers frequently used up most of the break to review one or two more questions. In what is left, students lined up for the restroom, took naps, discussed test questions, or quietly studied at their desks.

Classes ended at 5:30pm. As soon as the bell rang, students flocked to the cafeteria or nearby restaurants for dinner. Almost all 12<sup>th</sup> graders then returned for voluntary night study periods, during which teachers patrol the hallways to make sure students are studying quietly. Schools take night study periods seriously. In a school-wide parent-teacher meeting, the vice principal of Capital said to the some 500 parents in the auditorium, “Teachers and I found a racket in the hallways right before the mock exam. [This] reflects the fact that students are not mentally [ready].” The vice principal and the parents looked equally concerned, many had furrowed eyebrows and minced lips. Students can choose how long they wanted to participate in night studies, but almost all of them leave school are around 9:30 or 10:30pm. By the end of

the day, students wearily dragged their feet towards the front gates, through which they walked 15 hours before. Parents anxiously waited to walk or chauffeur their exhausted teenager home. Students continued to study after arriving home and report going to bed between 11pm and 2am. Table 2 summarizes the typical daily activities of the domestic department.

Schools could not hold classes nor enroll students in study periods on weekends. Nonetheless, some of the 12<sup>th</sup> graders pressured by the *gaokao* put on their uniforms and studied in school all day on the weekends, typically arriving by 9am. A few students who had tutors arrived late or left early, but most stayed at the school until 9pm. Overall, weekends were similar to night studies, with teachers patrolling the campus, students studying quietly, and school bells sounding as if it were a weekday. In this context, all activities in school and at home were test preparation activity.<sup>39</sup>

Table 2. Typical 12 <sup>th</sup> Grade Student Schedule in the Domestic Department	
Time	Activity
7:00am-7:30am	Arrive school
7:30am-8:00am	Test/self-study/flag raising ceremony
8:00am-12:25pm	Go through five classes of tests and reviews
12:25pm-1:35pm	Lunch
1:35pm-4:00pm	Go through three classes of tests and reviews
4:00pm-5:30pm	Self-study
5:30pm-6:30pm	Dinner
6:30pm-9:30/10:30pm	Night study
9:30/10:30pm-	Study at home

### Test Scores as Public Information

<sup>39</sup> In the words of the students and teachers, PE classes exist because they are part of the high school graduation exam, and the school holds them to maintain student health, which will facilitate efficient studying. Both reasons are test-related.

Schools frequently publicized students' test scores. Teachers posted lists with students' names, test scores, class rankings in a test, and their rankings in a previous test on classroom walls or bulletin boards. Schools also had "honors lists" in pink-colored paper to flaunt student achievement in mock exams in main hallways. The honors lists were printed in very large font size so that anyone could see the students' names, scores in each subject, and total mock exam scores across the lobby. When exam outcomes were available, schools touted the students admitted to PKU and THU by listing the names of students and university placement in red posters. The posters were placed at the school gates for passersby to admire.

Between students, the easiest way to obtain information about a peer's test score was to ask directly. During an observation in Pinnacle, I walked with Pan and bumped into her classmate, Mingjia, at the staircase. Mingjia held an "exemplary student award" certificate in her hands.

"How did you do?" Pan immediately asked, referring to the past exam they took.

"Um, I did okay." Mingjia replied.

Equally awkward and surprised, Mingjia looked eager to leave, but Pan and I (un)intentionally cornered her. Pan seemed unsatisfied with Mingjia's vagueness and asked further.

"Could you get into Tsinghua University?" She leaned forward towards Mingjia.

"Um, more or less."

"By how many [points]?"

"Um, I just passed the cutoff."

"What's the cutoff score for Tsinghua? 680-something?"

"Yeah, that's about what I got." Mingjia replied.

Asking about each other's test results was common practice and students often share their exam scores in detail and without hesitation. This example was the most awkward among all observed instances. Nonetheless, this conversation shows that students probed one another's test scores despite the potential awkwardness.

Over the two years of fieldwork, Pinnacle and Capital gradually moved towards withholding information on individual test scores. The posters were still available and the honors lists still posted on the hallway, but Pinnacle teachers no longer nailed student rankings and test scores on classroom walls. Despite these efforts, test scores remain public information. One afternoon in Capital, I was among the first to return to the classroom after PE class. Two girls, Yujia and Shali, were sorting out a pile of paper slips. I asked them what it was.

Yujia cheerfully explained, "We're sorting out test score reports. You know, the school told teachers that they shouldn't publicize our test scores, and this is what Mrs. Nie (the homeroom teacher) came up with. She cut out every row, so all we get is the line that contains our test scores. We won't know about other people's scores." Yujia then signaled me to go take a look.

Indeed, what used to be one piece of paper now became 32 slips, each with one student's name, subject scores, and total test score.

Students soon came back to the room, some girls were panting after climbing upstairs. As soon as they saw the pile of paper slips, they made a beeline to Yujia's desk and went through the pile. Those who found their own slips lingered to see other's test scores. Others who arrived late snatched their slip and then looked over other students' shoulder. Some shared information by exchanging slips. Shiying was one of the last to come in. A classmate had placed her slip on her desk. Shiying held her breath as she



looked at it and then let out a sigh of relief and dropped her shoulders. She then wandered around, curious about others' test scores.

In this incident, Mrs. Nie's activity defeated the purpose of keeping student information private. Similarly, other teachers often shared student test scores publicly whenever students inquired. One example took place during a self-study period in Mr. Long's classroom in Capital.

Zuwei, a tall thin boy, slowly walked towards Mr. Long. Zuwei stopped about one foot away from Mr. Long's desk, waiting to catch his attention. Mr. Long soon looked up from his Lenovo laptop and gave Zuwei an inquisitive look. Twisting his fingers, Zuwei hesitantly squeaked, "Can I know how I did in the last biology test?" Mr. Long raised his eyebrows and asked, "Huh? You don't remember how much you got?" "No, I do," Zuwei said, "But I don't know how I did in general."

Hearing that, Mr. Long pulled up an excel file that contained the entire cohort's test scores. He looked for Zuwei's name by scrolling down with his mouse. Zuwei immediately moved closer and leaned over to look at Mr. Long's screen.

"Well, you did pretty well. You were above average, a lot better than last time." Mr. Long commented. Zuwei took a closer look and then directed Mr. Long to scroll further down. When Mr. Long scrolled through a particular student, Zuwei suddenly inhaled, took a step back, put his hands on his head and cried in disbelief, "Oh, man! I got lower than (so-and-so)!" Mr. Long chuckled and closed the file. Zuwei went back to his seat and buried himself in a textbook.

By asking Mr. Long, Zuwei learned about a particular peer's performance and saw the entire cohort's test score. When this self-study period passed, I heard Zuwei openly discussing other students' test scores with friends in the room, claiming that he "saw it on Mr. Long's file."

Although Mr. Long only shared such information with one student in response to a seemingly innocent question, the result was that the whole classroom learned about each other's performance in the test.

In addition to teachers, parents circulated and compared children's test scores. In one observation, a few Pinnacle students gathered into a circle at the front of the classroom to retrieve their answer sheets that were just graded.

Students who found theirs scooted over so that others could move into the circle.

Yehua, a slender boy with gold-rimmed glasses who had apparently taken his, was packing up his book bag. He did not talk to other students. But as he walked towards the front door of the classroom, another boy from the other side of the classroom with a cell phone in hand looked towards Yehua and shouted, "Hey! Yehua! You scored 140?" Yehua turned around. With his eyes widened, he asked in utter surprise, "How did you know?" The boy explained with a grin, "My mom said your mom told her that you got 140!" The other students laughed. Yehua rolled his eyes and walked out the door.

This entire incident was less than 30 seconds, so fast that I did not see Yehua text his mother. Lili reported similar instances in Capital and called the parent network "an evil thing." Overall, public discussions of one another's test scores took place regularly in schools and every student I followed took part. One exception, however, was *gaokao* results. Not all students shared their *gaokao* scores or admission outcomes; some lost touch with classmates shortly after the *gaokao*. No longer meeting each other in school and going to different colleges, students in this study did not inquire about exam outcome of the peers who disappeared. Yet, while in school, with peers, teachers, schools, and parents all being involved, students often found their test scores to be public information whether willing or not.

### Intense Competition in Test Scores

Having a common, singular focus on each other's test scores, students intensely competed in test scores. While immediate competition involved one's fellow classmates or schoolmates, the extent of competition went as far as comparing between peers in other schools in Beijing and those in other provinces. Students in Beijing received their *gaokao* scores from their homeroom teacher three weeks after taking the exam. I followed Haochen and Pan to Pinnacle on the day they received their *gaokao* scores. Campus was unusually rowdy that day, filled by the chatters and laughter of seniors who came back to campus. Most of them went straight to their homeroom teacher, after which they chatted in small groups about summer plans, latest movies, and their exam scores. Haochen, who had landed in the top band of the Olympiad and had counted his *gaokao* score already, seemed quite relaxed. He walked with both hands in his pockets, striding along and saying hi with a smile to every friend or acquaintance on the way. Pan, on the other hand, looked anxious and walked in a faster pace.

As we entered campus, two boys on their way out asked Haochen how much he got.

"671, plus 10 extra points, so it's 681!" Haochen replied loudly with a broad smile. Upon hearing, one of the boys shook his fist at Haochen, pretending to be angry with his very high score.

We saw a group of four boys chatting in front of the cafeteria. They were Pan and Haochen's classmates. Haochen gleefully joined the group.

A tall boy about 15 feet away interrupted the group by shouting at Wenbin, Haochen's top performing classmate. "Yo! How much did you get?" The boy was so loud that he attracted the attention of the group. "691!" Wenbin confidently shouted back. "Fuck!

[That's] so high!" The boy pleasantly cursed and walked away. Some boys in the group laughingly agreed with "Fuck yeah!" Haochen took a step towards Wenbin and playfully elbowed him, "Why didn't you get over 700?" Wenbin chuckled, lifting one hand to block the soft elbow punch, "Dude, that's impossible!" The boys pleasantly talked about Wenbin's *gaokao* accomplishment with smiles, jokes, and laughter.

While the group of boys joked, laughed, and seemed cheerful, this was not the typical interaction on campus that day. The boys might have been particularly lighthearted because they were the top performers in a top performing class, in which half of the classmates would enter PKU or THU. As I hung around campus, it became clear that the day on which students returned to campus for their exam scores was a day of heightened competition between classmates and classrooms. Like most other days, students compared and shared information on each other's *gaokao* scores. Classmates were eager to figure out who ranked the top in the classroom, and how the classroom fared against students in other classrooms. As the example continues:

Pan signaled Haochen to go look for Mr. Hu, their homeroom teacher, to fetch their exam reports. I followed Pan into the building as Haochen dragged his feet behind. On our way up the stairs, Pan stopped to wait for Haochen. When he caught up, she asked him, "Who has the highest score in our class? Wenbin?" Haochen tilted his head toward the left and thought for a second, "Hm, it would be Jie Wang." Pan probed further and asked, "Did he get 700?" "No, Jie got 694. Wenbin was second, he got 691." Pan nodded. She looked deep into thought, but didn't say anything.

We met Mr. Hu at the teacher's office. He seemed glad to see us and merrily complained to us that he had been waiting at his desk all day for students to come pick up their reports.

“Mr. Hu, it’s such a pity that nobody in our class got over 700.” Pan commented.

“Nah,” Mr. Hu grinned. He shrugged and put his hand over his heart, “You all did pretty well!”

“But no one got more than 700!” Pan cried out.

“It’s okay. You guys all did fine, that’s good.” Mr. Hu reassured Pan that he was not upset.

I was confused about student fixation on getting 700 out of 750 in the *gaokao*. I initially thought it was an arbitrary goal that Pinnacle students set for themselves. However, it quickly became clear that it scoring above 700 was significant because of the heated competition between top performing classrooms in Pinnacle.

After Pan and Haochen went home, I saw Mingjia chatting with a group of girls near the corridor. Mingjia walked towards me and offered to stroll around campus together after the group broke off. As we walked aimlessly, Jiarui, a very tall, skinny boy in a white t-shirt came over. Mingjia happily waved at him and asked eagerly, “What’s the highest score in our class? Anyone get above 700?” Jiarui shook his head and sighed, “Nope, the highest is 694. [Our] average wasn’t even as high as the [other] class.” Mingjia looked disappointed but seemed to know this information already. She lowered her shoulders and looked at the floor for a moment. Both students seemed upset and the boy left quietly without saying goodbye. Mingjia and I then passed by a group of boys. I didn’t pay too much attention to them, but Mingjia hastened her pace and quickly walk past them in a stone face.

“Did your class do well in the exam?” I asked, wondering if she agreed with Mr. Hu.

“Heck, no!” Mingjia’s face immediately sunk and yelled almost despairingly, “Our class

did NOT do well! We didn't win against them!" She angrily pointed her chin at the group of boys we walked by.

For Mingjia, Jiarui, Haochen, and Pan, having a classmate scoring over 700 was important because their rival class outperformed them in the *gaokao*. Pinnacle's average in 2014 was over 650. Being in one of the two top classrooms, Mingjia's classroom average was higher than the school average, but not as high as the other classroom that might have had an average of over 670. To reach status parity with the rival class, the classmates desperately needed a classmate to be the highest performing student. In this context, 700 became the standard because anyone who scored above 700 would likely be the highest performer in Pinnacle.

Classrooms also competed in most of the tests and mock exam leading toward the *gaokao*. In late May, with one week to the *gaokao*, Mr. Tien, a middle-aged math teacher, walked into the room and found that students were deep into discussing mock exam answers or flipping through textbooks. Despite the chattering, Mr. Tien effortlessly grasped students' attention by announcing the average math scores in the last mock exam without raising his voice.

"Your average," Mr. Tien walked to the front of the room and held up a white piece of paper above his head. The students immediately turned silent and looked at him with tense, straighten backs. "Your average was 140. [Another class] had an average of 120." Mr. Tien announced. Upon hearing this, tension in the room was relieved as students eased their shoulders. There was a cheerful air in the room, as they wore broad smiles across their faces and resumed discussion over exam questions.

Comparisons between schoolmates were not restricted to students in the same cohort. Occasionally, 12<sup>th</sup> graders compared their scores with 11<sup>th</sup> graders. I shadowed Lili, a top performer in Capital who later went to Peking University.

After having lunch in the school cafeteria, we passed by the 11<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms on our way back to her classroom. Lili spotted that the 11<sup>th</sup> grade “Honors List” posted in the hallway and stopped to look at the pink poster. She studied the highest scoring student in each subject, compared who was good in which subjects, and pointed to the list of name that had the highest total scores, “Look!” She said, pointing at the name on the top of the poster, “These students are so good.” She said almost with a sigh, “They are so high [scoring] in the mock exam score, and they’re just in 11<sup>th</sup> grade! This is almost the same as our [mock exam scores]!” She minced her lips and then commented, “I definitely was not this high [scoring] when I was in 11<sup>th</sup> grade.”

Lili was not in competition with the next cohort, and the next cohort’s performance would not affect her chances of getting into her dream university. However, Lili was attentive to the younger cohort’s test scores and instinctively compared herself with theirs. The fact that she did so reflected students’ generally strong, or habitual, sense of competition with each other.

In addition to inter-cohort comparisons, competition frequently took place between schools. Obtaining test scores of other schools was difficult, but students compared their performances with peers in other schools as much as they could. Students often discussed how other schools were doing during lunch. When I shadowed Fei in Pinnacle, his friends abruptly brought up Capital as a potential rival school without knowing that I observed Capital students.

Fei and I joined a long table and sat across his classmate, Hongtao, with our chicken rice bowls purchased in the cafeteria. Hongtao was talking about Capital. Fei and a couple

other boys stopped eating and engaged in heated discussion about whether that school had become worthy of a rival school. When they compared the two campuses, the boys seemed a bit discouraged in having to admit Capital had a larger campus and newer facilities. Nonetheless, they quickly turned to comparing mock exam averages and admission rates in Peking and Tsinghua Universities. “They’re doing better each year. But seems like they’re not doing that well yet, at least not as good as Omega,” Hongtao concluded, “So it’s okay, they’re not here yet.” Fei was more cautious and reminded the others, “But we don’t know their average scores in the *gaokao*.” After voicing his concern, Fei paused, picking up his chopsticks, and softly added with a confident smile, “But I reckon they aren’t gonna surpass ours this year.” There was a sense of relief as the boys resumed eating.

Weeks later, Fei found out that I regularly visited Capital and asked me to share Capital’s mock exam results with him. Figuring that Capital’s mock exam results were public information, I flipped out my field notes to check the latest mock exam results. I told Fei about Capital’s average and their predicted number of students going to PKU and THU. Fei listened attentively, then raised his eyebrows and said, “Wow, that’s low.” He smiled in relief and reassuringly said to himself, “Good. They’re still quite far behind.”

Finally, student competition did not end within the city boundaries, but extended to students in other provinces. Because the students I followed usually lacked information to geographically distant peers, they often drew on a certain degree of imagination and abstraction. For example, talking about students outside of Beijing, Jiaqi commented in a fearful tone,



“You know, it’s good we’re not competing with those rural kids. They study like crazy. They’re like, mad. All they do every day is study. They do nothing but study. We can’t compete with them!”

Jiaqi and most students did not know students outside of Beijing and only had an imaginary image of their rivals in populous provinces. However, this fanciful image was validated by Dehong, a Capital student who transferred from Shandong province and who could speak about competition with those in other provinces. In his comments, Dehong linked student competition to regional disparities:

“It’s too easy to get into a top university in Beijing.” He said with a sneer and wrinkled nose. “My former classmates study all the time, much more than the students do here, but their chances of getting into PKU are close to zero. If I stayed in Shandong, I might as well forget about [applying for PKU].”

However, Dehong was the exception. Most students and teachers in the top high schools I visited commonly perceived rivals across the nation as imagined, vague figures. A telling example was a gathering for senior cohort 12 days before the exam. As I wrote in my field notes:

A girl with short hair and a sharp voice boarded the podium. She stood in front of the microphone and said loudly, “In 12 days, we will race toward the battlefield of the *gaokao*. The encouragements of our teachers and parents are the shields in our hands. Our effort and diligence are our swords.” She talked for about five minutes, comparing the exam to a final battle and promised that the 12th grade cohort would “fight for the highest honor for the school.”

After the girl finished, Mr. Liu, a 12th grade homeroom teacher, gave a very similar speech.

He started with “In just 12 days, you will march towards the battlefield of the *gaokao*” and ended by saying, “12 days later, you will bring honor to [our] school. Ten years later, you will become important people in your occupational field. Twenty years later, you will become the pillar of society, of our country, of our nation.”

In reality, for the elite students in Beijing, the *gaokao* is simply an exam that determines students’ college placement in China. Many students who do not go to their dream school lead fulfilling lives and are successful in their occupations. However, as these examples show, the collective obsession over *gaokao* has scaled up its significance to that of collective consequence. The *gaokao* was no longer simply a form of educational assessment, but defined a student’s success, the school’s honor, and even the nation’s future. This analogy shows that the *gaokao* is a matter of collective survival and group prosperity. With these added meanings and seriousness attached, test scores (that predict *gaokao* results) naturally becomes the students’ primary focus of attention and no other criterion will arrive at comparable significance.

### **Adult Emphasis on Test Scores: The Role of Teachers and Parents**

Teachers in the domestic departments conveyed clearly to students the significance of test score and reinforced the unidimensional status hierarchy. As mentioned, teachers who held classroom activities that were either tests or test reviews. They were also the source of students’ publicized test scores. Furthermore, teachers fueled competition between schools. For example, teachers often persuaded Olympiad winners to take the *gaokao* to raise the school’s *gaokao* average despite the fact that these students already obtained college admissions to PKU or THU. I met Kaifeng, a math Olympiad winner in Highland, after he signed the contract with PKU. He told me that he was working hard for the *gaokao* in our interview. “You’re taking the

gaokao?” I gasped, amazed that he planned to spend half-a-year on an exam he did not need to take.

“Yeah, I’m taking it. But it’s not useful for me [since] I already got guaranteed admission. I’m taking the gaokao to give [Highland] another student who scores 600 points.”

Kaifeng shrugged. “If I get over 600, that’ll count as doing something for the school. But just getting 600 is a bit, well, it’s a bit embarrassing. Should be higher. I’ll score about 650.”

Kaifeng scored 648 in the *gaokao*. When I texted to ask how he felt about the results, he replied succinctly that he was unhappy with the low score and much more frustrated about not being the top performing student in math in Beijing, which was the goal his teacher later set for him. Like Kaifeng, Fei in Pinnacle and Jun in Capital also took the *gaokao* to boost the schools’ average performance. In both cases, the Olympiad winners said that teachers “guilt-tripped” them into taking the exam by asking them to “do something for the school.” Although Kaifeng, Fei, and Jun were unsatisfied with their *gaokao* scores for various reasons, all three obtained *gaokao* scores that were significantly above the school’s average.

The fact that teachers often brought up other schools showed that *gaokao* competition was constantly on their minds. On a sunny day in summer, I stayed after class to chat with a biology teacher, Ms. Lin, in Capital. The young female teacher sat down beside me at a vacant student desk. She told me that she had received her biology Ph.D. from PKU and asked about my dissertation project. Then, facing me with one arm on the desk and another on the back of the chair, she started to compare Capital with other top high schools. She concluded, “Capital is an up and coming school. In Beijing, Omega, Pinnacle, and [another school] are definitely the best. Our school is not there, but it’s still in the top five.” As part of the interschool rivalry, teachers

gather information on other schools whenever possible. Pinnacle and Capital teachers asked me multiple times how their school differed from other schools and directly asked me to compare schools in terms of students' *gaokao* preparation. Capital teachers in particular frequently summoned me to their offices to "learn about my project," which in fact meant to "learn about rival schools."

Sometimes, teachers were so preoccupied with test competition that they saw students from other schools as threats against their own students. One of them was Mrs. Li, the head teacher of 12<sup>th</sup> grade cohort in Capital. In a rehearsal about what might happen on the exam day, she warned the students:

"In the test site ...students in other schools will come stab you because you're from Capital. Do not listen to them, do not help them. Whatever they say or offer, they're trying to hurt you."

Mrs. Li directly called students in other schools enemies who would do anything to sabotage Capital students in the *gaokao* ("stab you," "try to hurt you"). Mrs. Li's expressions were not the exception, but other teachers also shared this perspective. In addition to fostering a strong sense of competition and wariness between students in top schools, this common perception among teachers clearly demonstrated to the students the significance of test scores and the absolute need to focus on gaining high test scores.

#### *Teacher Perceptions of the Insignificance of Parents*

Taking test-based competitions rather personally, teachers often believed that students' test scores are their sole responsibility. Student performance, according to them, had nothing to do with even parents. When I asked teachers how they collaborated with parents or how they expected parents to help with exam preparation, most gave me a blank expression. In one

instance, a teacher asked me with a frown, “Why would parents have anything to do with the students’ performance?” The perception that parents are unhelpful in Chinese classrooms is in contrast to American classrooms, where affluent parents are highly involved in children’s college applications (Lareau 2015; McDonough 1997; Weis et al. 2014).

In fact, teachers such as Mr. Long were aware of the differences between the U.S. and China. Mr. Long was the head math teacher in Capital. A tall man in his early forties, Mr. Long had a playful demeanor and often used jokes and sarcasm to lighten classroom atmosphere. I often saw him patrolling the hallways, holding a pile of books or papers, with a pen in his front pocket, as if he were ready to discuss math problem sets at any moment. One afternoon, as he was patrolling the hallway, he saw me in the study lounge and decided to sit down to chat. He asked me to compare schools in the U.S. and Capital. When I mentioned the parental involvement literature that I have read, Mr. Long took out the pen in his pocket, turned it in his hand, and commented,

“In high schools in China, parents don’t have much communication with teachers. It’s not like American schools. I visiting [a school in the U.S.], I thought the school was pretty ordinary, but their parents had such a good relationship with the school. That’s not the case here, where parents don’t really contact teachers. [Parents] don’t come unless they absolutely have to.”

Having taught in different provinces in China and visited an American high school, Mr. Long’s personal experiences likely account for the typical parent-teacher relationship in top Chinese high schools. Yet, while Mr. Long noted the “good relationship” between parents and teachers in school, he did not necessarily want to build that kind of relationship himself. Rather,

like other teachers in this study, Mr. Long also preferred parents to take care of the student but leave everything else to them.

With a strong prevailing idea of parents' powerlessness (or even uselessness), teachers in this study actively discouraged parental communication. In our interview about a year later, I asked Mr. Long if teachers would like parents to contact them regularly. He frowned and explained with a sigh,

"Sometimes I don't really want them to [visit]. If [the parent comes and] sits down, that's at least 30 minutes right there. It's completely unnecessary, because I can just end [conversation] with a few sentences. They can text me or contact me online. Usually we don't, especially I don't, like parents visiting school."

Most of the teachers I interviewed shared Mr. Long's feeling that it was unnecessary for parents to reach out and that communicating with parents was time-consuming. In general, teachers expressed displeasure when being in touch with parents and usually tried to end conversation quickly.

Mr. Hu, a teacher in Pinnacle, provided an example of how to end conversation quickly. Mr. Hu was the homeroom teacher of six Pinnacle students in this study. He was a cheerful math teacher in his early-40s whose eyes narrowed when he smiled. When I interviewed him in the summer, I found him crouched at his desk in the vacant teacher's office watching the British TV-show *Sherlock* on his laptop in English with Chinese subtitles. As soon as he saw me, he sat up, paused the show, and smiled broadly. I grabbed a chair and sat down beside him. In the interview, I asked about his relationship with the parents, he instead said that he was barely in touch with parents. He said, simply, "Parents don't often contact me." I probed further and asked him to recall any incident if any of the students' parents had contacted him. He stared at

the six names I had listed and thought for a moment. He then thought some more. All of a sudden, he beamed up like a student who found the answer to a test question and pointed to Pan's name. Excited, he said in a slightly accelerated pace,

"Pan's mom sometimes comes in! [Her] mom texted and called me about how nervous she was about Pan. I told her that, 'We've been telling you all along that parents can get anxious, teachers are too, but you have to have faith in the child, because your anxiety will affect the child. That's for sure. So you must have faith.'"

From Mr. Hu's perspectives, Pan's mother reached out to him. Although Mr. Hu did not show signs of annoyance, his communication with Pan's mother suggests that teachers drew on their patience when dealing with parents ("we've been telling you all along"). Combining Mr. Long and Mr. Hu's reports, teachers rarely had face-to-face conversation with parents, nor did they welcome parents' texts or phone calls about students.

Teachers were extremely reluctant when forced to contact student families. An example is Mrs. Wu, Fei's homeroom teacher who taught math. I strolled with Mrs. Wu and her four-year-old daughter on campus in the summer that Fei graduated. A long-haired, soft-spoken teacher in her late 30s, Mrs. Wu broke her usually calm demeanor when she mentioned that Pinnacle "made" every 12<sup>th</sup> grade homeroom teacher do home visits with every student in the classroom to enhance student test scores by facilitating parent-teacher communication. With her eyes on her daughter running around, Ms. Wu let out a sigh and said something like this,

"Last summer, I had to visit every single one of them at their house, make appointments with their parents, and travel all over Beijing to visit them. Each student's family, one by one!" She rolled her eyes, "I mean, these information were all available in the student

profiles, but the school thought it would helpful for us to see the family. Is it helpful? I don't know. Maybe. But it took so much time!"

In Mrs. Wu's opinion, the school policy was stressful mostly because it was a waste of time. She and other teachers disliked the idea of visiting families because they deemed it inefficient in enhancing student performance. Like other teachers in Capital and Pinnacle, Mrs. Wu asserted leadership in preparing students for the *gaokao* and strongly believed that she knew the best way toward exam success. In this example as in others, teachers repeatedly stated that letting teachers take full ownership of students' exam preparation and having parents obediently follow were preferable to frequent parent-teacher communication.

In response to teachers pushing students to compete with test scores and discouraging parental input in school, the parents in this study refrained from interfering with children's test preparation and let teachers take full responsibility of children's exam preparation.<sup>40</sup> However, elite parents' non-involvement was a strategic choice aimed at supporting children's *gaokao* results. Elite parents in China had good reason to rely on schoolteachers. Top schools have exemplary records of accomplishment in sending students to PKU and THU. For example, while the average admission rates in Beijing is about 1%, Capital and Pinnacle send about 15-25% of their students to PKU and THU each year. In top performing classrooms in Pinnacle and Omega, the acceptance rate is above 50%. Parents knew that schools motivated teachers to enhance student test scores by offering bonuses depending on the number of students admitted to top universities. In addition, parents considered that teachers specialized in exam preparation and held knowledge that was otherwise unavailable to them. Specifically, schoolteachers in top

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<sup>40</sup> The parental norm of following the teacher is likely practiced throughout the country, as scholars suggest that the Confucian cultural heritage that prompts parents to highly respect schools and teachers (Lam et al. 2002; Littrell 2005). In this cultural system, parental deference to teachers are expected and normalized.



schools created and reviewed *gaokao* questions. Since schoolteachers cannot give private lessons outside of school, the only way to access their knowledge about the exam was by going to school.

With these in mind, parents in the domestic departments firmly believed that relying on teachers was the optimal strategy. In turn, they willingly adopted a hands-off approach to children's exam preparation. The parents I interviewed frequently expressed that teachers knew best about exam preparation. Huating's mother summarizes this norm of parental view in our interview:

"Pinnacle teachers suggest that [we] simply follow the steps planned by Pinnacle, walk on that path, and that's sufficient. [We] also feel that teachers in Pinnacle are the best."

Parents' complete trust in teachers also leads to the lack of parent-teacher communications, which was welcomed by teachers. I interviewed Kaifeng's mother, Mrs. Zhou, a bubbly professor in PKU. When I asked her to describe her interactions with Kaifeng's teacher, she told me in a matter-of-fact tone that "[she] hadn't" because there was no need to do so. She explained,

"I've never met Mr. Xie (Kaifeng's homeroom teacher and Olympiad coach). Well, I texted him once [last year]. I think he's a very responsible teacher for the children."

The interview date and the mother's report suggest that Mrs. Zhou was not highly involved in Kaifeng's preparation for the Olympiad and the exam. Over the three years, she had not talked to the teacher, never met him, and the only communication she recalled was a text exchange. Mrs. Zhou, however, was not usually laid-back. Quite the contrary, on her social media profile, she seemed to have a hands-on personality. She was made plans for the family

and colleagues, was on top of her work, and took charge of family life. However, her confidence in the teachers led her to adopt the hands-off approach.

The elite parents in top schools had plenty of opportunities to be involved in children's schooling. The fact that they simply let these opportunities slip away suggests that the hands-off approach is a strategic choice. Parents could meet with the teachers as frequent as once per month in the last year of high school in parent-teacher meetings. Parent-teacher meetings were group meetings that took place in school auditoriums. In all of the meetings that I attended in Capital, about 500 parents sat in the auditorium as teachers lectured at the podium on stage for about two hours. The speaker typically started by presenting an overview of student performance, what the next steps were, and the number of students in each score bracket in a mock exam. The speaker usually ended by encouraging parents to follow the teachers' lead. For example, in a parent-teacher meeting in April, Capital's vice-principal ended his hour-long speech by saying,

"Every teacher and every student has many things to do. Many, many things. The only thing we (parents) need to do is to stay calm, take measures to persistently progress step by step. This is the end of the lecture today, thank you."

In this meeting, the vice principal reminded parents that teachers and students are busy and asked parents to stay out of the picture. Furthermore, he did not take questions from parents and simply dismissed them after the speech. However, parents could ask him question if they wanted. I saw that about a dozen parents approached the vice-principal on the podium after the meeting. Despite the small circle that formed around the vice principal, the vast majority quietly walked out of the stuffy auditorium.

Parents met with homeroom teachers after the school-wide meeting. Meetings with homeroom teachers were also group formats, in which some 30 parents sat at their child's desks and listened to the homeroom teacher talk about the students and next steps for over one hour. The format and content of classroom meetings was similar to meetings at the school level, but focused on the classroom performances. In a meeting I joined, Mrs. Nie, the homeroom teacher, gave parents handouts about her history of sending students to PKU and THU. She then gave examples of how students should fill out college lists, and then proceeded with exam details such as what to bring and what not to bring to the test sites. When the meeting ended, Mrs. Nie excused the parents just as how she excused students for breaks by saying, "Okay, that's it for today. Come talk to me afterwards if you have questions." A few parents approached her, but the majority chatted amongst themselves or left right away.

Yet, refraining from communicating with teachers did not mean that parents were completely clear about what was going on and had no further questions. Rather, most elite parents had questions, but chose to keep to themselves. For example, in another parent-teacher meeting in Capital, the speaker orally delivered a to-do list as homework and then dismissed the parents. As the majority of the parents got up and walked out sluggishly, I approached Shiyang's mother, Mrs. Liu.

I asked Mrs. Liu how she felt about the meeting. She paused and frowned, "It's quite confusing. What do you think?" I admitted that I did not fully understand the teacher and did not get what the homework was. Mrs. Liu nodded. We joined the wave of parents walking out of the auditorium and walked down the narrow stairs. She then told me that she did not keep track of what parents were supposed to do at what time and

that the speaker sounded like mumble-jumble toward the end. She shrugged. We kept walking.

Mrs. Liu was a professor who had attended THU. She usually preferred things orderly and clear, just like the neatly arranged powerpoints that she used to win the best lecturer award at her institution. However, she did not feel the need to ask for clarifications even though she did not understand the directions given to her. In our interview, I asked if she contacted the teacher for other things. She replied:

“I don’t often contact the teachers. How do I say this, I never actively reached out to the teachers. I never felt the need to say anything to the teachers after parent-teacher meetings. There’s nothing to talk about.”

In this example as in many others, parents often deferred to the teachers and the school about *gaokao* preparation and accepted the teachers’ plans without question. In fact, some parents thought that joining the meetings counted as significant involvement already. One among them was Xijun’s father, a chief editor of a government newspaper. In our interview at his office, Xijun’s father admitted that he rarely attended parent-teacher meetings and did not reach out to teachers.

“Maybe it’s’ because we’re quite busy, we very, very rarely approach [teachers]. Unless they tell us it’s time for parent-teacher meeting, and they request that parents to come to the school. [If] all other parents go, then I’ll go, or Xijun’s mother will go. Rarely, we rarely take the initiative to contact teachers.”

Xijun’s father was not alone in reluctantly going to the meetings (“unless...they request parents to come,” “if all other parents go, then I’ll go”). Although the government allowed parents to take days off for parent-teacher meetings, I rarely observed a parent-teacher

meeting in a classroom where every parent came. The arguably most important parent-teacher meeting took place a few weeks before the *gaokao*. Even then, not all parents attended as some seats were empty and the parent I followed directed me to take a “usually vacant” seat.

In this context, parents understood that teachers were the most capable people to train children for the *gaokao*. While parents adopted a hands-off approach to children’s *gaokao* preparation, their lack of involvement should not be taken as a sign of negligence or inattention to children’s test scores. Instead, holding back questions, not approaching teachers, and listening to multiple hour-long lectures were a part of their strategy, which was to enhance children’s exam performance by closely following the teacher. Through these behaviors, parents demonstrated their devotion to raising children’s test scores and signaled the significance of preparing and excelling in the *gaokao*.

## **Summary**

The *gaokao* is serious business in China. The media, government, and public collectively assume its importance and make amendments for the test-takers every year. Students who pursue top university admission focus on *gaokao* preparation on a daily basis. In the domestic departments, all school activities are test preparation activities. Students pay attention to each other’s test scores and intensely compete amongst peers. Parents and teachers, the key adults who represent agents of adult society, convey clearly to students that test scores are the center of adult attention. Teachers take the lead in training students and fuel student competition, while parents collaborate by strategically deferring to the teachers about exam preparations. Receiving clear signals of the importance of the *gaokao*, students in this study consider test scores as the essence of schooling. Test scores are related to individual success, group survival,

and the nation's prosperity in students' daily conversation and analogy. In such a context, test scores have an elevated importance to the point where no other criteria can challenge its centrality in student life. Consequently, test scores meet the necessary conditions for a unidimensional status system.

### CHAPTER 3

#### A ROAD INCREASINGLY TRAVELED: PREPARING FOR TOP AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES

Students in the international department did not prepare for the *gaokao*, but focused on applying for U.S. (and occasionally other Western) universities. Yet, while the U.S. focuses on selecting well-rounded student characteristics (Karabel 2005; Stevens 2007), the international-bound students in this study approached college applications as if it were an exam-based system and focused on the SAT as if it were the *gaokao*. In other words, the international-bound students in China did not share similar high school life with American high school students despite applying for the same universities. Rather, their high school life was almost identical to their peers in the domestic department. Students, teachers, and parents in the international department emphasized the importance of obtaining the highest possible test scores. The importance of test scores (specifically, the SATs) was elevated to such a degree that no other criterion challenged its centrality. In turn, test scores served as the foundation for a unidimensional status hierarchy in school.

#### **Collective Focus on the SAT**

Media commonly refer to the SAT (and ACT) as “the American National College Entrance Exam” (People’s Daily 2016; Sina 2016). Reporters write extensively about students who received full scores on the SAT and those who obtained multiple admissions from top American universities. Their stories detail how they studied for the SAT and how they chose which university to attend. Netizens then tweet these stories, congratulating the success of these few

individuals online. Students in the receiving country or universities also share with each other these news reports, oftentimes expressing their eagerness to meet the incoming freshman. Much like the students who received top scores in the *gaokao*, SAT top performers experience immediate fame in the city, province, country, and across continents.

The government tries to decrease the number of students going abroad for college with little effect (Chen 2015), and most predict that the number of students going abroad will continue to grow until well into the 2030s.<sup>41</sup> As the number of students going abroad increases, SAT preparation has become and continues to be a thriving industry. Every school district has numerous cram schools (or “shadow education”). Some focus on SAT training, others provide both training and lead trips for students to take the exam in Hong Kong or Singapore. Two or more cram schools with the same service often occupy different sides of a busy intersection. Similarly, private tutoring for the SAT is common Beijing. Although less visible than cram schools, private tutors are widely accessible through personal network or ads on the streets. Selections of books in bookstores near the schools also reflect the general focus on SAT preparation in the local community. Students often noted that the bookstores they frequented had racks of SAT guidebooks, vocabulary, and mock SAT questions, but a limited selection of other literature genre. To the extent that bookstores cater to the local clientele, the type of books they carry signals a general importance of SAT preparation among residents in the neighborhood.

Elite parents demonstrate their devotion to child’s SAT preparation by providing the costs associated with taking the SAT. These include the \$15,000 for international department

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<sup>41</sup> The number of students pursuing Western universities continued to grow. Between 2013 and 2015, the number of Chinese freshmen in the U.S. grew by 45% and Chinese students now accounts for about one-third of the international students in American universities (Institute of International Education 2015).



tuition, \$3,000 for cram schools, and \$100 per session for private tutors.<sup>42</sup> Outside of the school year, parents send children to summer camps in the U.S. to enhance children's English ability, typically with budgets ranging anywhere from \$1,000 to \$50,000. Taking the SAT also involved a considerable amount of money, as children make up to five trips to Hong Kong or Singapore to take the exam. Other than monetary investments, the elite parents in this study made non-monetary sacrifices for the SAT-preparing child. Parents reported spending nights researching about American universities, waking up early to make a fresh loaf of bread for the child every day, or searching for qualified agents to assist with college applications in hope that the child obtains a high SAT score. Overall, the SAT occupies considerable attention in the family in the college application process.

### **Test-Focused Activities in International Departments**

Student schedules in the international department were largely identical with those in the domestic department until they received their admission results in fall of spring semester of 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Before completing their college applications, the students arrived school by 7:30am, went through five classes with ten-minute breaks in between, had lunch, sat through three more classes, had dinner, and studied in school until 9:30 or 10:30pm. Students typically spent their weekends in cram schools or private tutoring that coached them for the SAT until they obtained a satisfactory test score. Since they took the SAT in the summer after 11<sup>th</sup> grade or at the start of 12<sup>th</sup> grade, schools were often worried that students would focus on test preparation and neglect other admission requirements. Schools developed strategies to cope with student tendency to focus on tests. For example, Capital scheduled one class session every

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<sup>42</sup> The numbers listed here are general estimates. Exact amounts vary depending on student participation and choice of cram school or private tutoring.

day in the afternoon to force students to participate in on-campus activities that counted toward extra-curricular participation or provided opportunities to demonstrate student leadership.

After receiving their admission results in spring semester of 12<sup>th</sup> grade, students no longer studied on the weekends and had significantly more free time in school. International departments did not have standardized curricula and offered various courses depending on the availability of the teachers. Having completed all core courses and left with elective classes, student activities in school varied by school and by individual course load in the last semester. For example, students in Capital often arrived at school around noon for classes in the afternoons; students in Pinnacle reported arriving for class in the morning and leaving school after lunch. Capital students who took AP Microeconomics had class every Thursday, those who did not came to school for self-study (see Table 3 for typical student schedules in the international department).

**Table 3. Typical Student Schedules in the International Department**

Time	11 <sup>th</sup> Grade-12 <sup>th</sup> Grade Fall	12 <sup>th</sup> Grade Spring	
		Pinnacle	Capital
7:20am-8:00am	Arrive school	Arrive school	Arrive school
8:00am-12:25pm	Go through 5 classes	Go through 5 classes <sup>^</sup>	
12:25pm-1:20pm	Lunch	Lunch	
1:30pm-4:10pm	Go through 3 classes	Go through 3 classes or go home	Go through 3 classes
4:10pm-5:30pm	Participate in activities for college application		Go home
5:30pm-6:30pm	Dinner		
6:30pm- 9:30/10:30pm	Night study at school or go home		
9:30/10:30pm-	Study at home		

<sup>^</sup> Classes in spring of 12<sup>th</sup> grade are often self-study sessions

The height of college application activities in the international department took place in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, during which students often claimed that their levels of anxiety surpassed those of their domestic-bound peers. Recalling his college preparation process, Tony, a dark-skinned high performing boy in Capital, expressed anguish about 11<sup>th</sup> grade:

“I felt like I was dragged behind a car my entire 11<sup>th</sup> grade. [I] was striving like hell to catch up.” Looking back, Tony commented about his college application process, “If you’re active, like you preview the materials before class, review and do your homework after class, write some essays for some competitions, and then ask questions after class, teachers will like you, and they’ll be even happier to answer your questions. But I didn’t have time to do that, I was studying for the SAT, preparing for the AP tests, and taking the ECE<sup>43</sup>.”

In his statement, Tony acknowledged the various application materials necessary for college applications. He listed the need to get a good GPA by finishing homework and pleasing teachers, write essays, and demonstrate extracurricular excellence by winning competitions. However, Tony prioritized test preparation over all other admission requirements and felt the competing demands were overwhelming.

Like Tony, most international-bound students focused on preparing for various admission tests, especially the SAT. In fact, students approached the SAT as if it were the *gaokao*. Students’ obsession with test preparation and test scores surprised me since my first encounter with international-bound students. In my initial visit to the international department in Capital, Mr. Long invited me to substitute a class by introducing students to American college life. After I briefly introduced college life in the states, I asked the students if they had any

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43 ECE stands for educational credential evaluators, which prepares evaluation reports that translate foreign student achievements into U.S. standards.

question or wanted more information. Immediately, many of them raised their hands and asked questions such as, “Will I get in to Bryn Mawr if my SAT score isn’t that high?” “Is it true that Chinese students need higher SAT scores to get into the same universities as American students?” and “Would you agree that we prepare for the GRE and SAT simultaneously?” By the end of class, all the questions I took were about test preparation and SAT test scores.

Over the course of fieldwork, I observed students regularly focusing attention to SAT preparation, while not showing nearly as much attention on other things. For example, students sometimes forgot to bring their textbooks, but all of them always kept sheets of SAT vocabulary at hand. They organized their SAT notes better than class lecture notes. Students often took notes in class in unrecognizable handwriting and indented with scribbles. By contrast, SAT notes were free of scribbles, contained neatly written rows of Chinese words and alphabetically arranged English words. Students’ scattered their class lecture notes on their desks, book bags, or between books, but kept SAT notes in clear folders. Students focused on preparing for the SAT in their spare time. In self-study periods or during breaks, many students would take out their SAT vocabulary while a few others tried to finish their homework so they could focus on the SAT. Whenever I asked students about their evening activities, the most typical answer was to “study for the SAT.” I had not heard students talk about the universities they hoped to attend or their application essays. However, details of one’s SAT plans and targeted scores were common conversation topics.

One reason for students to emphasize test scores above all other admission criteria was that they strongly believed that SAT scores predicted college application results. Their focus on the SAT even continued after everyone in the international department received their admission results. I observed a 12<sup>th</sup> grade math class in late May. The teacher had assigned students to

divide into groups and investigate a statistical relationship between any two variables of their interest. In the next class, students presented their findings to the class. Students examined various creative topics, such as the relationship between height and the probability of being in a relationship in high school or choice of college major and departments (international or domestic). Yet, out of the myriad of topics, Liz and Tina decided to examine the relationship between SAT scores and college admission outcomes. I sat in the back of the classroom and listened to their presentation.

The two girls pulled up a power point that showed, in large print, “SAT Scores and University Admissions.” Liz, a cheerful girl with short hair and pimples, walked to the front of the room, smiled at her classmates, and introduced their project. Pointing to the screen, she scanned the room and said in a matter-of-fact tone, “This should be what all of us care about the most. I mean, what all of us *cared* about the most.” ” Liz grasped her classmates’ attention with the opening sentence. Instead of dozing off or secretly texting under the table, all of the students raised their heads, sat up straight, and attentively looked at the screen in front of the room.

The girls analyzed data from “the CUUS 2016 cohort” that contained a sample size of a few hundred. Liz’s teammate, Tina, then presented the findings.

Liz clicked on the laptop to switch to the next slide, which was a scatter plot with a clear positive association. “The higher the SAT, the higher ranked the school, this is pretty obvious.” Sounding a little nervous, Tina spoke in an accelerated pace as she looked at the screen, “All the dots are around the line. So we can see there really is a relation between the two. To prove further that they really are associated, we did hypothesis testing.”

Liz clicked through some more line graphs as Tina and the students looked at the slides.

Tina concluded that, “The conclusion is, although we very much want to tell ourselves that getting a low SAT score doesn’t mean we’ll end up at a low [ranked] university, the data shows that the SAT really does determine what university we get in to.” The audience nodded in agreement, suggesting that they found the findings persuasive.

This example points to students’ focused attention on the SAT in two ways. First, Liz and Tina’s decision to investigate the association of SAT scores and college outcomes signals their prolonged interest in SAT even months after taking the test. Second, the fact that the word of “SAT” instantly captured the interest of their classmates (waking up and attentively looking at the screen) shows that most or all of the students in the classroom were highly interested in the topic. Despite all of them completing the SAT and college applications at least half a year ago, the SAT remained “what all of them cared about the most.”

### **Test Scores as Public Information**

Test scores, from their scores in a classroom test to the SATs, were public information. Students shared their scores with each other and remembered peers’ performances in tests. Test scores were a common conversation topic, and students did during breaks, meals, and after school. The students were so attentive to each other’s scores that they would even secretly discuss it during class. One among the many incidents took place during Mr. Williams’s 11<sup>th</sup> grade AP Economics class. Mr. Williams, a sturdy, white American in his late 20s to early 30s, had an animated style of teaching. I joined his class in an afternoon. Mr. Williams was busy explaining the law of demand, while students listened to lecture in relaxed postures.

In the middle of his lecture, Samantha, Elaine, and Alice suddenly started giggling at the left of the room. Mr. Williams paused and looked over to their side, slightly frustrated. With the chalk still in his hand, he asked, “Hey, girls, what’s going on? What are you all of a sudden so smiley about?” The three girls looked at each other.

Samantha, a girl with fair skin and a long ponytail, took the role of the group’s spokes girl.

Samantha looked up at Mr. Williams and answered joyfully, “Because someone got a very good SAT score.” Mr. Williams squeezed out a smile. “Okay, I happy for you,” and then gently asked them to discuss it after class. The girls kept silent in the remainder of the class. But as soon as it was break time, other students swarmed around to ask who they were talking about, who turned out to be a boy in another classroom.

It appeared that the student told either Elaine or Alice about his most recent SAT outcome. However, this information spread rapidly, such that by the next hour every student in another classroom knew about the student’s SAT score. Because they regularly engaged in information sharing, students understood that keeping one’s SAT a secret was close to impossible. Instead, they provided information on their own scores as information and gossiped about other students’ performances.

Students remembered each other’s SAT scores for a considerable time, often years after high school. Students and I visited each other in the U.S. In our meetings, we would talk about their high school days and about their classmates. The SAT often came up as part of our conversation. For example, Joe visited Philadelphia in the summer of his sophomore year. We talked about his high school years as we walked in center city. I asked what he thought about Ashley’s performance in the SAT. Although the two classmates had not met after high school, Joe remembered Ashley’s test results and immediately replied, “She did very well. She got

2230.” Another time, I wanted to look up Tracy’s SAT score but did not have the data at hand. Since Tracy did not respond in a timely fashion, I texted two of her classmates. Both students texted back immediately with the exact score Tracy had reported. When Robert visited Philadelphia, I asked how his classmates did in the SATs as part of our conversation about high school life.

Without even a blink, Robert responded, “Samantha was highest. She got 2270.” He paused and then added, “Tony also did well. The highest he got was 2170, but his combined score reached 2320.”

The quote from Robert is important in many ways. It showed that students freely circulated this information to people (including myself) in their social networks. Students remembered each other’s SAT scores for years even if they had lost touch with each other. Moreover, this quote demonstrated the extent to which even details of each other’s SAT score were publicly available. In those few sentences, Robert shared his extensive knowledge: he knew the highest score among his classmates; he remembered Samantha’s SAT score; he recalled that Tony came in second place; and he could list the score combinations from Tony’s multiple SAT attempts.

Partly because SAT preparations took place outside of school and no subject in school focused on the SAT, teachers did not publicize SAT scores in the classroom. However, they openly shared students’ test scores in the classroom. I joined Mr. Fong’s math class in spring of 12<sup>th</sup> grade when I shadowed Robert. Mr. Fong was a soft-spoken man in his forties. Students went through the class in low energy, presumably because it was late in spring and they were not highly motivated in class. Five minutes before the break, about lunchtime, students were particularly restless in their seats.



Many students rested their heads on the desk; some packed up their backpacks. Mr. Fong was still lecturing, but the room was filled with sounds of zippers zipping and books closing. Some cleared their desks; others kept only their textbooks out. The students were clearly eager to be excused, even I felt prompted to close my notebook. However, Mr. Fong said something, and then suddenly showed students' test results in the last math test on a power point slide with the names, test scores, and rankings of more students than those present in the classroom. Upon seeing it, all of the students abruptly halted their activities and immediately intently at the screen. The font size was small, and students in the back hurriedly walked to the front of the room to get a closer look. Students who sat the front then quickly stood up at their seats so those who walked over would not obstruct their view. A few seconds later, when students were still studying the list, Mr. Fong turned off the computer. A few students turned and looked at him in a mixture of disappointment and surprise, but he dismissed the class and reminded the students to be ready for a test tomorrow.

Mr. Fong's power point likely provided information on not only the classroom I observed, but also all students in the international department. While Mr. Fong perhaps thought this was a more efficient way to deliver students' test scores, he gave students access to more information than they would likely have gotten by comparing among themselves. Mr. Fong also likely did not intend to allow students to study every rival's test scores, as he withdrew the information within a few seconds, just enough for students to look at their own scores. However, many students then surrounded him to ask for their own test scores. This suggests that students knew that teachers were obliged to tell them their own test scores, thus they prioritized obtaining information of others when given the opportunity.

Not all teachers shared student test scores in detail as Mr. Fong. Sometimes teachers only gave vague information about the classroom's aggregate performance. Despite the lack of details, students gathered information on each other's test scores whenever teachers passed out essays or reviewed tests questions. Ms. Johnson, a white American woman in her late 20s, was the 11<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher who did not provide detail test scores in the classroom. Toward the end of class, Ms. Johnson distributed students' graded essays, which they turned in a few days ago.

Ms. Johnson picked up a small pile of paper, sighed, and passed them out. "You guys have a long way to go." She announced in a grave manner that no one received full marks (6 points) and none received 5 either. Students seemed a bit uneasy and looked tense. Most lowered their heads and stared at their essays, a few looked at each other with minced or bitten lips.

Ms. Johnson then said that the highest scoring student received a 4.

Students quickly looked around to figure out whom it was. A girl pointed to Samantha, signaling the entire class that Samantha was the mysterious high achiever. Some students looked at Samantha with admiration, while Samantha watched Ms. Johnson with a straitened back.

Ms. Johnson then announced that many of them got 3, a few received 2, and some even 1 (the lowest score). There was a feeling of distress among the students.

"How much did you get?" Vivian, a shorthaired girl who sat next to Tony, asked him in hushed voice. Tony showed her his essay without a word. He then looked inquisitively at her. Vivian replied, "Me, too." The two leaned towards each other and discussed the essays in hushed voice during the remainder of the class.

Student approach to essay scores in the international departments was akin to how students exchanged test score information in the domestic department. In this example, Ms. Johnson did not intend to publicize individual essay scores. Yet, the few sentences she said in the classroom initiated student reaction in obtaining and sharing test score information. Within seconds, while the teacher was still speaking, students learned that Samantha received a four and was the highest scoring student in the classroom; Tony and Vivian learned that they received the same score. These incidents took place regularly in the international department and contributed to turning test scores into common knowledge among peers.

### **Intense Competition in Test Scores**

By focusing on and publicizing each other's test score, especially the SATs, students had many opportunities to compete with each in test performances. It should be noted that international-bound students compared schools less frequently and less intensely than the students in domestic departments did. This is likely because the same university accepted students with different SAT scores and students with the same SAT scores could enter different universities. However, competition in SAT scores was nonetheless fierce, as students compared their SATs with peers in the same classroom, across cohorts, and in different provinces. During the course of research, I often heard students compare their classmates' SAT scores with their own. One example was Tony, the boy who scored 2320. In our follow-up interview, I asked Tony how his classmates did in their college applications. Tony shook his head and expressed that he was dissatisfied with the overall performance of his classmates. He brought up two classmates who should have been top performing but were not.

"Justin only got over 2100 in his SAT." He frowned, "But it wasn't that bad."

Then, turning his frown into a sneer, he mentioned Melanie, a bubbly girl who went for a yearlong exchange in the U.S. By virtue of her exchange experience in the U.S., Tony thought she should have scored higher than he did.

“[Melanie] only got 2060 in her first time taking the SAT.” He then gave himself as a reference point to explain the apparent atrocity, “I took the SAT half a year later and I got 2080. Yeah, it was six months later, but still.” I suggested that she might have improved her scores a lot later. Tony rolled his eyes and said, “She definitely got less than 2200 in her final SAT score. She ended up somewhere like [the University of] Sussex.”

By using himself as a comparison point, Tony showed that classmates regularly compared each other’s SAT scores between each other. Tony went with his mother on an exchange in London when he was young. Having more exposure to English, he did not compete with two random classmates, but Justin and Melanie, both of whom had good command of the English language and one having lived abroad. Tony was judgmental about the competition results, such that when the two failed to reach parity with him, Tony expressed anger, shame, and even hints of despise (“only got,” “ended up somewhere”).

Students also regularly engaged in cross-cohort competitions with the SAT. In late summer, I had coffee with Selena, an athletic, top performing girl in Capital who got in to Penn. As we talked about school and other students, she brought up that Tracy, who was a cohort below her, approached her to ask for tips on how to get into Penn. Selena recalled,

“Just the other day, Tracy asked me about college applications. She was especially worried about her test scores. Actually, my SAT score wasn’t high last year this time.” She smiled and said amusedly, “She already did really well, but she wants to retake [the SAT]

again!”

“How much did she get?” I asked.

“She was lower than 2200, but she got 660 in her reading.” Selena said with a tone of approval or admiration, and then compared Tracy’s score with hers. “Last year, around this time, I only got 5-something in my reading section.” She scratched her head and then gave a precise number, “570. I almost wanted to tell her that SAT was not an issue!”

As usual, students asking for college preparation tips meant asking for SAT preparation and targeted SAT scores. Tracy and Selena were in different cohorts and were not competitors for admission to the same university. Yet, although Selena already gained Penn admission, she instinctively compared her SAT score to that of Tracy. Selena’s instinctive reaction showed that students in general had a strong sense of competition among each other, regardless of whether the rival’s performance affected one’s chances of top university admission.

Students not only compared test scores within the school, but also against peers in other schools. In our interview in fall, Selena revealed that she had dated a boy in another school in Beijing. Drawing on her experience interacting with students in other high schools in Beijing, Selena described how a conversation between international-bound students in Capital and other schools would seamlessly flow from a harmless question about one’s SAT scores to intense comparisons of each other’s SAT scores. She sighed and rolled her eyes,

“Chinese students, the minute you meet them, they’re like, ‘How much was your SAT?’ [Then] they’d say, ‘Oh I got lower than you did’ [or] ‘I got higher than you did.’ Like that.”

In Selena’s opinion, comparing SAT scores had become the standard greeting format among international-bound students. However, unlike the mechanical American greeting of

“how are you,” these Chinese students expected each other to provide an honest answer and responded with their personal information. In these exchanges, the person greeted did not ask to be in the comparison group. In fact, Selena’s expressions in this conversation suggest that she did not want to be under constant competition with other students. Yet, the previous example of Selena’s instinctive comparison with Tracy’s SAT scores shows that students have become accustomed to the practice even though they did not enjoy it.

Students were wary of their performances in comparison to others and often utilized various channels to obtain competitors’ SAT scores. Selena’s network came through her then-boyfriend who introduced her to students his school. Tracy utilized her cram school friendship network to obtain such information. In my follow-up interview with Tracy during the summer after high school, I asked her to talk about Capital. Tracy replied that she liked Capital, but thought Omega was a better school. She explained:

“I have a friend in Omega who went to the same crams schools with me since 10<sup>th</sup> grade. She got into the University of Chicago. [This girl] is really something. She took six SAT subject tests, and except for Literature, she got full score on every single one.”

Tracy then added, “Students in Capital aren’t as good as students in Omega. This is clear, but still really upsetting. ...Omega is exceptionally good. Not because of its environment, but because of its students, they’re all so good (high performing).”

By comparing top student performances in the SATs between Capital and Omega, Tracy concluded that Omega was better than Capital. Although the extremely high performing girl might have been an exception rather than the norm in Omega, an important component of competition was having *the* highest performer in one’s own group. Through group competition in the SATs, Tracy was frustrated that she (and her school) lost to Omega by a sizable margin.

Students also regularly measured their performance against other schools. Yet, Tracy and Selena were among the few who had access to the SAT results of other schools or individual students in other schools. Those without such information focused instead on comparing admission outcomes, which they believed were significantly determined by SAT scores.

While students were generally concerned with SAT competition, not all students exclusively focused on the SATs. Occasionally, a few suggested that other factors were associated with their admission outcomes. One of the factors was counselor networks. This discourse emerged when Tom Ross, a middle-aged American former-college admission officer, left Capital for Pinnacle. Tony and other students rumored that Tom single-handedly sent eight students from the previous cohort to a university ranked in the top 10 in the U.S. East coast. Concerned with their admissions and intending to see how much counselors mattered, Tony and other students in Capital kept an eye on Pinnacle's admission results. I had lunch with Tony after the he received his admission results. He suddenly brought up the topic of Pinnacle's admissions as we ate. Tony complained again that Tom was the reason of their sub-performance in top university admissions.

Dipping his chopsticks in the plate of cold noodles, Tony, "Pinnacle is having a really good year. Their students all went to top universities. We aren't as good." Looking concerned, Tony stirred his noodles in no particular direction and stayed silent for a while.

Tony and his friends used Tom's job-hopping as a lesson to remind one another that counselors played an important role. The students paid attention to counselors likely because they lacked information on each other's SAT scores. In the interschool comparisons, Capital students had made a questionable assumption that all else were equal between the two

schools, including SAT scores. Furthermore, students noticing the importance of the role of counselors did not mean that they had changed their approach toward American university admissions. Whereas other counselors emphasized essays, portfolios, and the fit between students and schools, Tony and his friends minimally revised their perception of the SAT. Previously they thought the SAT determined admission results; now they believed that the SAT plus a little help from counselors determined admission results.

Student competition often expanded comparing SAT scores with peers outside of Beijing because American universities reviewed all Chinese applicants in one pool. Lacking in vital information about the SAT outcomes in other provinces, many students engaged in imaginary competitions with rivals outside of Beijing. Hannah, a dark-skinned girl with long hair in Capital, was one of the students who expressed concern with peer competition outside the city. Hannah joined the online chat group for the incoming Chinese freshmen cohort in Johns Hopkins in late spring. She told me that one of the first topics in group conversation was to compare other's SAT scores.

"So many people in the group got 2400 (full score). They came from all sorts of schools, like Hangzhou Foreign Language School, or Nanjing Foreign Language School." She then raised her voice and loudly complained, "Our [scores] were SO much lower!"

Hannah was not alone in feeling outperformed by peers from other provinces. Like her, Alex in Capital and Joe in Pinnacle both joined the online chat group for the incoming cohort to the University of Southern California (USC). In the USC chat group as in the one for Johns Hopkins, students' first conversations was about each other's SAT scores. I had lunch with Alex a sunny day in late spring, when he brought up their conversations with a sigh.



“Joe’s and my SATs were similar. His was a bit higher than mine was. But those students from other places, whew, those were really [high].”

The fact that Hannah and Alex entered the same universities as those who had much higher SAT scores showed that SAT scores were not as crucial as the students thought. However, focusing on test-based competition, neither student realized this piece of information, nor did they feel lucky that they share admission results with high performers. Rather, the students emphasized the fact that they and their school’s average test scores were lower than those from other provinces, and expressed a feeling of defeat. These examples highlight that even when circumstances suggest that test scores are not as dominant as they perceive, students remain fixated on test scores and compete with peers in school, in Beijing, and across China.

### **Adult Emphasis on Test Scores: The Role of Counselors and Parents**

While counselors in the international department acknowledged the importance of SAT scores, they emphasized the “fit” between students and universities when making college choices. Counselors were generally troubled by parents’ over-emphasis on the SAT. I interviewed Chris Jenson, a tall, middle-aged American counselor in Capital’s counseling center. We sat at an open-space area with a few sofas in the bright consoling center. After Chris described his interaction pattern with his 25 students in 12<sup>th</sup> grade, I asked how he helped students decide on a college list. He explained that, while he tried to help students come up with a sensible list that matched student interest and university strength, counselors had little influence in the decision process.

“In the end, it’s the parents’ and students’ list.” He said with a sheepish smile, “We have parents that are willing to completely change everything that we’ve been doing with the students [in the beginning of 12<sup>th</sup> grade].”

I asked on what basis parents made the decisions to override counselors’ suggestions. He responded that it was SAT scores. As Chris explained,

“I look at the [new] list of schools, and then say, ‘why is that?’ Some of the students would say, ‘well, look at what happened to my SAT.’ So the student was sure she was going to get a 2200, and she got a 1900 on her SATs. That eliminates a lot of the possibilities of those higher ranking schools. The family thought, they may just completely [change the list]. Or it may be the other way, suddenly the student gets a higher SAT and [the parents] say, ‘Woops, all of the schools your counselor suggested are too low.’”

To Chris and other counselors, their opinions clashed with the parent’s ideas in the extent to which the SAT should determine college choices. For counselors, the SAT served as a cutoff score that students simply needed to pass. But for the parents, it was the basis for college choice. Because parents had more control over students’ applications decisions than the counselors did, the counselors sometimes felt a sense of powerlessness in their profession.

Tom Ross, a plump middle-aged counselor in Capital who later went to Pinnacle, echoed Chris’ opinion and expressed that he found it difficult to dissuade Chinese parents from focusing on the SATs when deciding college choices. I ran into Tom outside the school gate one morning in winter. He signed me in to the school and we walked together to the international department.

Before we reached the building, Tom casually complained that it was application season, and many of the parents were instructing the high performing child to simply “take out the rankings on *U.S. News* and apply to the schools ranked in the top 10 or the top 30.” Frowning behind his anti-pollution mask, he complained that this approach was fundamentally different to his, which focused on finding the best-fit university for each student.

From Tom’s perspective, the Chinese parents seemed to believe that the SAT was the sole determinant of college outcomes. Parents’ overwhelming attention to the SATs compared to the mild emphasis from counselors led to counselors’ frustration and the implicit accusation that elite parents were preventing them from doing their job. Matching children’s SAT scores with university applications was similar to the system in the domestic department, where *gaokao* scores determined university placement. The counselors’ discomfort with parental approach to college applications thus reflects conflicting selection mechanisms behind two educational systems.

Chris, Tom, and other foreign counselors often explained parents’ coupling of SAT score and university choice a cultural shock. However, even the Chinese counselors in top high schools found the separation of university choice and student’s SAT scores to be a challenging topic when communicating with parents. John Ji was a Chinese counselor in his early forties. During an observation, I ran into him in the study lounge and chatted with him about how he helped students and their parents decide on a college list.

John sighed and crossed his legs. He gave me an awkward smile and told me that, when he tried to dissuade parents from making decisions exclusively based on rankings, parents would often accuse him of being inconsiderate. Mimicking a parent, he raised

his voice and squeaked, “You’re also Chinese, why can’t you understand?” He sighed and swiftly changed topic to lighten the mood.

The SAT’s degree of significance was a major source of disagreement between the counselors and parents’ strategy to college applications regardless of counselors’ nationality or cultural background. Despite being the experts, the counselors I interviewed reported that parents clearly held the power over college choices. Specifically, Chris and Tom both estimated that less than one-third of the students were able to make their own decisions as to which schools and majors to apply. Because parental emphasis on SATs outweighed their professional advice, the signal parents sent to the students—that the SAT was central to college applications— was vastly stronger than that of the counselors.

From the parents’ perspective, the elite parents in this study were often unsatisfied with counselors’ less-than-full attention given to test scores. Sensing that they did not receive adequate support from the counselors, the parents sent children to cram schools and private tutors that specialized in SAT preparation. As a result, despite counselors’ relatively less emphasis on the SAT, the parents sent an especially clear signal to the students that SAT was of crucial importance. In an interview with Claire’s mother, she explained that she was generally happy with Capital, but was unsatisfied with the insufficient SAT training.

“Every student needs to take the SAT. I think the school should have organized and provided additional tutoring a few months before the exam, so that students, all of them are doing this anyway, don’t need to get help from other agencies. It’s tiring for the parents and also the students. If the school could organize [SAT preparation] altogether, including signing up for the test and other things, this would make things a lot easier.”

In another interview, Alex's mother expressed a similar opinion:

"The school could have done more. Take the SAT, I say, if you want to study, you can study yourself. But the school doesn't have that course, right? You have to work on it yourself, right? So children have to go outside to learn it."

Like many other parents, Alex and Claire's mothers asking the school to take over SAT preparation reflected counselors' comment that Chinese parents overemphasized the SATs. This parental suggestion ran against counselors' opinion. Since counselors were already uncomfortable with the power of parents and their extreme focus on test scores, parental suggestions of further centralizing the role of SATs in school were unlikely to materialize.

While the counselors correctly felt that parents overemphasized test scores, contrary to what the counselors imagined, parental focus on the SATs was an informed decision. The elite parents in this study understood that American university applications required many different criteria and was not a test-based selection. One example is Tracy's father, a researcher with military affiliations. In our interview, I asked him what he thought the school and the counselors could do more for students.

"The school could do better preparing students for understanding of admission requirements in western universities, because it's very different from Chinese universities. Students here don't really understand too much, like why extracurricular activities are important, what purpose they have, and what can be demonstrated in these activities."

The response Tracy's father provided shows that he not only knew about the various criteria related to college admission outcomes, but also hoped that the school would set a clear

standard on the relative importance of each. Yet, before he obtained such information, he and other parents focused on helping the child with SAT preparation.

Part of the reason for parents to focus on the SAT was their anxiety over children's college preparation, which they acknowledged was significantly different from their own. Likely due to the feeling of anxiety, these parents focused on the familiar criterion, test scores, and sought to enhance children's SAT scores by employing cram schools and private tutors despite the counselor's strong opposition to the practice. All of the international departments in this study had a similar policy that discouraged students from hiring private counselors, but the policy was rarely implemented. For example, Central had a zero tolerance policy. Pinnacle and Capital seriously discouraged this practice in parent-teacher meetings by emphasizing the credential and expertise of school counselors. Yet, the international-bound students sought assistance outside of school. Omega students were known by other students as having a large budget in hiring private counselors and tutors. Julie's mother hired a private counselor to help with applications.<sup>44</sup> Except for Brandon, all other students in Capital and Pinnacle had utilized private tutoring or counseling services.

The schools in this study made various degrees of compromises. Capital's bottom line was to keep school documents from passing through the hands of private counselors and students, which was crucial to Capital's ambition in building its international reputation. Another top high school that I contacted collaborated with selected private agencies so that the school counselors knew and could work with the private counselors. Central had the strictest policy that led to backlash from parents. Julie's mother mentioned to me after our interview that the director of student counseling, a middle-aged grey-haired American man, threatened that any

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<sup>44</sup> Julie later withdrew from the private agency because she felt it was unhelpful, not because of the school policy.

student who hired private counselors would be dropped from school counseling. Another parent suggested that the upset parents filed complaints about him as well as the principal who supported this decision.<sup>45</sup>

Perceived conflicts between counselors and parents were often exacerbated by the lack of communication or miscommunication between the two adult parties. Like the parents in the domestic departments, most parents in the international departments did not meet or contact children's counselors. While many parents were unsatisfied with the school, a few completely depended on the counselors and followed instructions thoroughly. One of the few was Brandon's father, a PKU graduate himself, who expressed his satisfaction with Brandon's school counselor:

"Brandon's counselor, William Duncan, is from the U.S. He says he has over 20 years of experience. I felt he was honest, and he was familiar with many universities in the U.S."

Despite being satisfied with the school counselor, Brandon's father rarely communicated with William and the father did not provide any specific example of how William assisted Brandon in the interview. The father was an exception among the parents in this study. He did not let Brandon seek private assistance in the college application process and insisted that Brandon prepare for everything himself in the process as the counselor suggested. Yet, despite being the outlier in this study, Brandon's father demonstrated the same behavior pattern as other parents and had limited communication with the school counselor.

Counselors often noted that they welcomed parents and believed it was important to have smooth communication with the parents. Trying to make sense of the lack of

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<sup>45</sup> I did not include the mother and child in this study because the child was in a younger cohort. However, she told me that the conflict between parents and principal at the time of my research may have shaped the principal's decision to restrict my research activity at Central.

communication with parents, foreign counselors often attributed the reason to language barriers. In Tom and Chris' words:

"Parents don't really come in. One reason is language, many of them don't speak English, and I don't speak Chinese. So there's a problem of communication. Usually I only meet with the students." (Tom Ross)

"We always welcome parents to come in and join the students. ...Now, having said that, how often do the parents come in? Not very often. ... But we always welcome them to come." (Chris Jenson)

Due to language barriers, parents who visited the school asked children to serve as their translators. Yet, even in the rare occasions, the counselors noted that students questionably translated their words to the parents. In separate interviews, Tom and Chris both suspected that the students often "did not know how to translate because their English was not good enough," or students might have "purposefully mistranslated some of the things [the counselors] said to their parents to serve [the students'] end" when students disagreed with their parents in college application choices. Having a faulty mediator, communication was less than smooth between the two parties who already significantly differed in college application strategies.

Language might have contributed to the lack of parent-counselor communication, but it was not the primary reason as foreign counselors believed. Instead, parents habitually relied on the school for college preparation while supplementing what they thought school lacked, which was SAT preparation, with their own means. Students rumored that John had the most parent visits in school presumably due to him being Chinese. Yet, when I asked him how frequently parents contacted him, John shook his head and said:



“Not much, not much at all. There are a few parents who make an appointment with me and come to talk. The one who came the most met with me 3 or 4 times [in the year].

About a total of 10 parents contacted me. That’s about a quarter of the [senior cohort].”

According to John, parents did not frequently contact counselors in general, regardless of whether there was any language barrier. The lack of communication between parents and counselors may have prompted the parents to take matters into their own hands when feeling unsupported. In this way, the lack of communication (or miscommunication) contributed to parents escalating the importance of the SATs and counselors increasingly deemphasizing its importance.

In the international department contexts, parents had the upper hand in deciding children’s college choices even though counselors held expertise knowledge. Although school counselors were not marginalized, parental emphasis on obtaining high SAT scores overshadowed the counselors’ emphasis on “fit.” Despite competing voices from the adults, students received clear signal because counselors’ opinions were a small whisper compared to the parent’s loud sound. Parents sent a clear signal to students that test scores, especially the SAT, was of absolute importance for college. Consequently, the idea that test scores, especially the SAT, were crucial to college admission became the main signal delivered by adult society.

## **Summary**

For the international-bound students, the SAT is of utmost importance. The media, netizens, and neighborhoods collectively emphasize the SAT above all other admission materials needed for American universities. Students pursuing higher education abroad focus on preparing for the SATs and treat other admission criteria as excess demands. Students also

share each other's SAT scores as if it were public information and compete with peers throughout the nation in their SATs. Although the key adults do not convey identical message to the students, parent opinion overshadows counselor advice by actively disregarding school policy and sending children to private agencies. Thus, the main signal students receive from adult society is that SATs are more important than everything else in the application process. The largely coherent emphasis on test scores elevates its significance to a degree unmatched by other criteria, thereby laying the foundation for test scores to become the main criterion on which students construct school status systems.

## CHAPTER 4

### SOME STARS SHINE BRIGHTER THAN OTHERS

The greatest difference between unidimensional status hierarchies and multidimensional status hierarchies is the number of criteria that members can utilize to mark status, which shapes how members navigate the social processes of generating inequalities. Members of unidimensional hierarchies must consistently compete with each other in the rewarded criterion and overlook all other characteristics. In due process, members mark boundaries between status groups and are mindful of their possibilities of status mobility. Simultaneously, because social associations are nonthreatening to the status quo, boundaries do not serve exclusive purposes, and members freely establish relationships across status groups. With repeated fierce competition, members admire those who consistently outperform them. Since outperforming others in the rewarded criterion establishes oneself as unquestionably superior, members therefore believe that individuals with high status are better than others in *all* dimensions. By regularly acknowledging their defeats, members with low status learn to justify the hierarchy by attributing status to factors they cannot control. Members with high status also adopt this explanation and have considerably elevated status.

In this chapter, I provide evidence of a unidimensional status hierarchy in top Chinese high schools and identify the dynamics of inequality in such a status hierarchy. I first demonstrate that the students use test scores to establish a unidimensional hierarchy in school. Other characteristics, if rewarded, are secondary and unable to challenge the centrality of test scores in this hierarchy. I show that students mark strong boundaries between status groups; however, students freely associate with peers from various status groups. Finally, I demonstrate

that all members, regardless of their positions, draw on a genetic explanation to justify the test scores-based hierarchy.

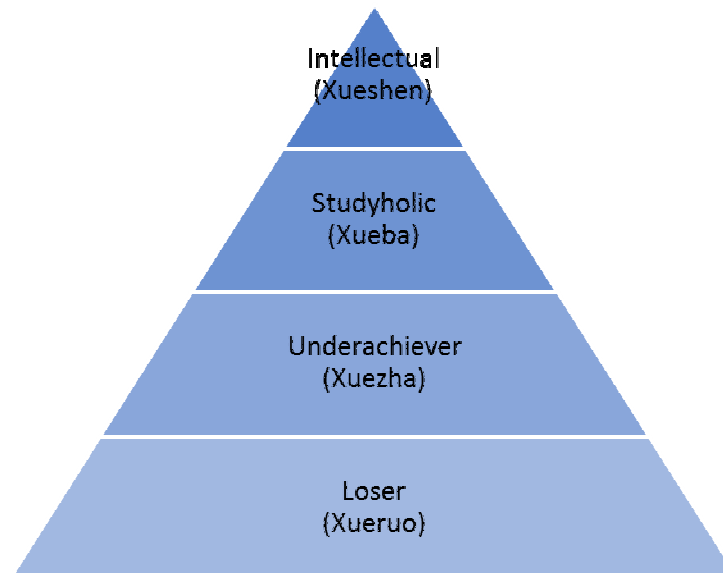
#### **Four Status Groups in a Unidimensional Status Hierarchy**

In the schools I visited, students in both the domestic and international departments established a unidimensional status hierarchy with test scores. The student hierarchies in this study were clear and straightforward: those with above-average test scores had high status, while those with below-average test scores had low status. Students often used test scores interchangeably with other terms, such as grades, rankings, or college placements. Students in the domestic department used grades and rankings in addition to test scores because test scores throughout the semester determined grades in each subject, and their rankings. For these students, grades and rankings were similar to test scores because all three predicted *gaokao* scores and college placements. Students in the international department used test scores interchangeably with college outcomes because they perceived that SAT scores predicted college outcomes and information of each other's SAT scores and college outcomes were available before graduation. For example, I asked Sinian, a boy in the domestic department, who he thought had high status in school and why he thought so. He responded without hesitation, "Shiying, because she has really good grades!" When I asked Brandon, a boy in the international department, how status was determined in school, he stated flatly and succinctly, "It depends on which university you get into." These two instances showed that grades and university placements were often akin to *gaokao* and SAT test scores in daily conversation.

Yet, just as status theories argue that it is impractical for a hierarchy to count half of the population as having high status (Milner 1994, 2015), the students in this study adopted a

secondary criterion to subdivide the high and low status groups—ease. Scholars suggest that ease is a form of cultural capital that reflects an embodied social experience derived from privileged upbringing (Bourdieu 1986; Khan 2011). However, the Chinese students in this study were generally anxious about their test scores. Rather than embodying ease, student participants defined ease as the opposite of diligence, hard work, or effort. Student demonstrations of ease consisted of whether and how much a student participated in activities unrelated to exam preparation such as online gaming, doing sports, and time spent on eating and sleeping. In this context, students defined ease by signs of diligence and work. Using this alternative definition, students used ease as an important, albeit secondary, factor that students used to shape the school status hierarchy.

**Figure 3. Status Hierarchy in Top Chinese High Schools**



Using test scores and ease produced a four-fold typology of status hierarchies, shown in Figure 3. On the top of the hierarchy are the Intellectuals (*Xueshen*), which means “study god” in literal translation. Students define Intellectuals as “those who don’t work too hard but get really

good grades.” The second group is the Studyholics (*Xueba*), the term meaning “study tyrant.” Studyholics refer to students who “work very hard and get good grades.” The third status category, the Underachiever (*Xuezha*), which means “study slag” in Chinese, consists of students “who don’t work hard and don’t get good grades.” At the bottom of the hierarchy are the Losers (*Xueruo*), or the “study weakling,” who “study very hard but still get bad grades.” These terminologies are so common that they have become slangs. For example, students would say they were “doing the Studyholic” to indicate they were studying. When drawing one another’s attention to an Intellectual’s exceptionally high academic achievement, students often said, “Come worship the god(s).” Students also jokingly called themselves as “being Underachieving” when they wanted to take a break from test preparations.<sup>46</sup>

In this chapter, I rely on students’ self-identification or validation by peers to place them into specific status groups in the very high performing schools studied. Not all students belonged to a clear status group.<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, the students who did not specifically identify with a particular status group positioned themselves in the status hierarchy as well. Since the students used grades and college placements interchangeably with test scores, I also adopt their mix of terminology in this chapter. Students in the domestic and international departments had an identical status hierarchy. Thus, while I describe instances from one department, all of the examples in this chapter can be replaced with examples from the other.

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<sup>46</sup> The slang-like use of these terms on student forums also suggests the commonality of the four status groups in the country in general. Many scholars and PhD students in the U.S., China, and France who conducted ethnography with teenagers told me that the students they studied also shared a similar status system in the non-elite, rural, migrant, or low-performing high schools.

<sup>47</sup> Milner (2015) terms these students as the “crowd.” However, crowds are detached from the students who have clear statuses in school, while the students in this study often defined their position using the status terminologies.

An example of an Intellectual is Kaifeng. Kaifeng was a top achiever in Highland who received guaranteed admission to Peking University (PKU) by being in the top band in the High School Olympiad. His test scores were so high that teachers expected him to boost the school's average *gaokao* score and hoped he would become the city's top performer in math in the *gaokao*. In our interview, Kaifeng reported that he stayed in school until 10:30 p.m. every night after he received guaranteed admission to PKU. However, while other students studied at night, Kaifeng played with Rubik's cubes or solved math problem sets that were beyond the scope of the exam for fun. After he returned home, Kaifeng watched "a couple episodes of cartoons" or went online, gaming for a "little while" every day. He regularly discussed the cartoons and reported his gaming progress to classmates. These behaviors qualified him as an Intellectual and the ideal representative of Highland.

Tracy was a Studyholic. Tracy was skinny girl with short hair and large eyes in Capital. Her SAT score of 2200 was relatively high among peers, but not as high as the Intellectuals who scored above 2300. Tracy later attended Johns Hopkins in the U.S. Tracy was very hard working. Whenever I visited her classroom, she always had her nose buried in a book, worked on essays, or was memorizing SAT vocabulary. Even her classmates and teachers thought she was a workaholic because they rarely saw her rest or take breaks. My first interaction with Tracy was at the end of 11<sup>th</sup> grade, when she discussed with me her plans to apply for the University of Chicago after attending the university's summer camp. She was visibly tense and spoke as if she was in a hurry. Tracy was energetic, but her dark circles under her eyes made her look tired all the time. A high performing and visibly diligent student, peers considered Tracy a solid Studyholic.

Mark was an average-performing student in Capital who self-identified as an Underachiever. Mark was a tall, dark-skinned boy with thick bangs who often wore a carefree smile. Mark went to the University of British Columbia. He applied to Canadian universities because he thought his SAT score of 2180, which he only achieved after taking the test five times, was not high enough to get into a top American university. Mark did not study as hard as other students did. In a classroom observation, Mark suddenly came to the back of the room and sat beside me. Initially surprised, I soon realized that he was using me as a camouflage to play online games. During class, Mark's classmates quietly studied or did homework while he furiously clicked his black Lenovo mouse. As an average performing student who participated in activities unrelated to test preparation, Mark self-identified as an Underachiever.

An example of a Loser was Chunyu, a skinny boy in Capital. Students usually did not name specific individuals as Losers, but over time, a few referred to him after some probing. The students I talked to described Chunyu as a boy who "never did well in his studies, but he was super hardworking." In their reports, Chunyu slept for only "2 to 3 hours every day since the start of 12th grade" and soon fell ill. His schoolmates rumored that the direct cause of his illness was his extreme work schedule. Yet, as soon as he recovered, Chunyu continued to study very hard in the last year of high school. Students often saw him studying in the classroom all the time. Yet, despite his diligence, Chunyu "always ranked in bottom in the cohort." Chunyu was an example of a visibly diligent student who received low test scores, and he became "an obvious example" of a Loser.

Although students acknowledged ease to a certain extent, it played a secondary role to test scores and exceptionally high test scores were crucial to Intellectual status. Students who were moderately high performing did not qualify as Intellectuals even when they demonstrated



talent in sports and/or arts. An example that highlighted the centrality of test scores above all other factors, including ease, was the comparison between Claire and Brandon. Brandon was an athlete and violinist in school. When other students stayed in the classroom to study, Brandon and his friends often spent their breaks on basketball courts. In my scorekeeping, Brandon was often the highest scoring player on the court. Teachers publicly praised his musical talent and told me that he had played violin solo in school. Brandon was not an academically top student, but he had an average SAT score and was top-performing in his favorite course, AP Economics, in which he finished assignments early and frequently answered peers' questions. However, Brandon had lower status than Claire, an Intellectual whose extracurricular activities also focused on academics—she was the chair of the social science club and participated in planning school academic events. Occasionally, before tests, Claire worked very hard. In one day-long observation, I was following Brandon and his friends to lunch.

The classroom was noisy, students were pouring out of the door and clearly eager to get food. I saw Claire talking to a friend who stopped by her desk. She showed no intention of getting up.

About an hour later, the boys and I came back to the classroom. Brandon and others promptly headed towards the basketball court to make the most out of the rest of the break.

Claire was the only one in the classroom. She sat at her desk and focused on homework. As I debated whether I should approach Claire, a girl walked into the classroom. I caught the girl at the door and asked her if Claire had lunch in hushed voice. The girl turned her head to look at Claire and then looked back at me. She shrugged, "No, [Claire] was here all the time." Perhaps seeing the worried look on my face, she then gave me a smile and

said in a relaxed manner, “Don’t worry, [Claire] does this all the time. We just let her be.”

Despite her work-laden schedule, Claire had very high status because her SAT score was 2330, rumored to be the highest in school. The distinction between Brandon and Claire was clearest after students received their admission results: Claire enrolled in Yale. By contrast, Brandon had an SAT score of 2140 and enrolled in the University of California, Los Angeles. The school publicly celebrated Claire’s achievement, but paid little attention to Brandon and the others because they were not as high-performing. For example, the department showed each student’s admission result to visitors on a large screen facing the entrance of the building. Claire appeared first and was followed by other students’ headshots, including Brandon’s, with no specific order. To tout Claire’s achievement, teachers asked Claire to make a life-size poster about herself for public display; they did not ask Brandon to do so. When I conducted observation in Capital the following year, most students knew about Claire’s legacy and referred to her as the Intellectual or “superstar” that “everybody knows.” When I mentioned Brandon, none of the students knew about him. The comparison between Brandon and Claire demonstrates that even the strongest demonstration of ease (time spent away from studying) could not compensate for the lack of exceptionally high test scores.

### **Drawing Boundaries between Status Groups**

Intellectuals were the most distinguished status group in school. Few students belonged to this category, and those who did stood out. Students had a consensus of who was Intellectual in school. In three separate interviews, Mingjia, Wenbin, and Huating identified the same student, Jie, as an Intellectual in Pinnacle.

“[Jie] is super high performing, so high that we can’t even compare [with him], to that level. Basically he can get full scores on all science subjects, like that. ...He’s not very studious, he just does well. [He’s] smart. He’s always sleeping; he needs to sleep for a long time. He naps during breaks, and gets super high test scores. That’s an Intellectual.” (Mingjia)

“Starting in the tests before the *gaokao*, [Jie] got over 700 points in all of them, and he scored 719 once! That time we all said he’s the champ. We all respected him [and] thought he was a Studyholic. But he’s actually more like an Intellectual. [He] goes back to his dorm every night at 9:40pm. I asked [his roommate] to see if he studied there.

They said he just slept the whole time. But he still got super high grades. ” (Wenbin)

“If he’s not eating, Jie will definitely spend most of his time sleeping. I’m quite close with him, we sit together in the classroom. You really should interview him. He’s super high performing. Jie is an Intellectual.” (Huating)

These accounts showed that students shared a common idea of who were Intellectuals in school. Jie received Intellectual status due to his incomparably high test scores and ease, demonstrated by sleeping a lot. To verify whether he was truly Intellectual, Jie’s classmates went so far as to ask his roommates about his activities in the dorm. Students referred to Jie as someone who was in an unachievable high position and firmly placed him in the top of the status hierarchy in school.

In Capital, Tony was an Intellectual because he had a very high SAT score. His peers recognized his achievement and awarded him Intellectual status. In separate interviews, Tracy and Stacey nominated Tony as one of students with highest status in school. In separate interviews, I asked the two girls what they thought about Tony.

“We all think Tony is an Intellectual because his scores are really, super high. Didn’t he get like 2300-something? And he got 114 in the TOEFL. That’s basically the highest in our class. His score in American History was at least 100 points over mine. And he never studies in the classroom. He always goes to the student council office and studies there. No one sees him studying, so we all call him an Intellectual. He also has all sorts of activities, like student council, inter-school stuff, and some research project (with university professors). People in the classroom pretty much admire him and call him an Intellectual.” (Tracy)

“I think Tony is an Intellectual. He probably fools around every day. [His] IQ is too high. Whether he hides and study in the student council office, we’ll never know. He always says he does leisure reading in the office.” (Stacey)

Students agreed that Tony was an Intellectual because he was high performing and at ease when in the classroom. When I shadowed Tony, I found that his schedule took him across campus multiple times every day. While most students stayed in the building for the whole day, a typical day for Tony in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade was as follows:

In the morning, Tony asked me to meet him directly in the student lounge and not in the classroom. He said that the classroom was too boisterous and he couldn’t concentrate there, so he went to the lounge to study alone. He returned to the classroom for class. During breaks, he would go back to the study lounge to memorize SAT vocabulary when classmates chatted in the classroom or on the hallway. His classmates went to lunch together at noon, but Tony headed straight to a conference room next to the principal’s office in another building to chair the social science club meeting. He rejoined his classmates for classes in the afternoon. However, he promptly left the classroom during

breaks and looked for teachers in other cohorts to discuss various tasks or projects that he participated in. Tony was not always on campus during night study. When he was, he studied alone in the conference room where the club met earlier at noon or in the student lounge. His classmates sometimes came looking for him to discuss questions.

Tony did not intentionally pursue Intellectual status. His disappearing from the classroom was because he wanted to focus on studying efficiently, which he considers best done alone. However, his being in the classroom only when not studying led to his classmates observing him always at ease and obtaining very high test scores. Because Tony fit the definition of an Intellectual in their observations, his classmates commonly assigned him the top status in the school hierarchy.

Students distinguished Studyholics from Intellectuals and did not allow others to mistake the two. In Huating's explanation, it was necessary to distinguish between the two groups because "Intellectuals are better than Studyholics. Intellectuals are more admired and worshiped." In my observations and conversation with students, they gently but firmly corrected me when I confused people as having Studyholic or Intellectual statuses. In one example, I joined Shuhua for dinner in the school cafeteria one night. I had observed her top-performing classroom and had gotten to know many of her classmates. The cafeteria was quiet, as it was late and most students had already finished dinner. With few students nearby, our conversation turned into a comparison of the three highest achieving students at the school: Shiyang, Dapeng, and Ziyi, all of whom were Shuhua's classmates and all of them later attended PKU or THU. When I commented that all three were Intellectuals, Shuhua immediately clarified that the three were in fact different: Ziyi was a Studyholic, while Dapeng and Shiyang were Intellectuals. In her detailed explanation:

“Ziyi is not as good as [the other two]. Ziyi is not as good as they are in time management. Like Dapeng and Shiyang, although they have lots of work and are exhausted, they will make sure that they sleep every day and everything is well-scheduled every day. If they want to eat something nice, they will eat something nice; if they should sleep well, they sleep well. Shiyang still slept eight hours a day throughout senior year, and Dapeng still slept a lot during his busiest time. But Ziyi was different. She sacrificed rest for studying. People like Shiyang and Dapeng knew what was important [in tests], but Ziyi covered all of [the materials], and it feels like she’s less efficient.”

Ziyi had high status in Capital because she was top-performing. In my observations, teachers often printed out Ziyi’s exemplary essays and shared them with other students. However, although she had an extremely strong command of Chinese language, she did not have top status because she lacked ease. The example of Ziyi in fact points to the dominance of test scores in the unidimensional status hierarchy. Ziyi was already a Studyholic, which was a relatively high status group in school. Pursuing Intellectual would have been a risky strategy because she would have fallen into low status if her test scores decreased as a result of demonstrating ease. Her decision not to pursue Intellectual status showed that Ziyi preferred having high test scores to demonstrations of ease. This strategy, which other Studyholics also adopted, pointed to the significance of test scores in the unidimensional status hierarchy.

Underachievers were beneath the Studyholics. The distinction between the two groups was clear. Since the two were dissimilar in both test scores and ease, students who belonged to one group were hardly mistaken for the other. A few students experienced status mobility in the hierarchy. Among them, most crossed the boundary between Studyholics and Underachievers.

Typically, this would happen when a Studyholic grew tired of studying and received lower test scores, or when an Underachiever started to focus on studying and obtained higher test scores. One of the few examples was Jiaqi, an originally high-achieving student whose academic performance steadily deteriorated throughout high school. By the end of 11<sup>th</sup> grade, I observed him frequently skipping night studies. He did not go to school on the weekends either. During 12<sup>th</sup> grade, I observed Jiaqi reading car magazines while other students were studying in the same classroom. The reason was, as he put it,

“Since I’m not going to beat (outperform) those high achieving kids whether I study or not, I’m just not gonna [study].” I then asked why he didn’t work hard for a longer time to pursue higher test scores, as his parents had hoped. “No reason. I thought about it. I just stopped working hard in the end.” He shrugged and then grinned mischievously.

While Jiaqi was an Underachiever in school, his teacher, Mr. Long, reported that Jiaqi was high performing before 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Jiaqi himself claimed to have “stopped working hard,” suggesting that he indeed worked hard before his test scores dwindled. In other words, Jiaqi was close to being a Studyholic, but later became an Underachiever in school. Furthermore, even when he self-identified as an Underachiever, Jiaqi secretly studied with diligence. For example, he asked me to practice English with him and to go through his short essays (tested on the *gaokao*) in empty classrooms multiple times. His mother also reported that Jiaqi spent his weekends studying at his desk at home, which I had observed in a home observation on a Sunday afternoon:

Jiaqi picked me up at the bus station and we headed straight to his home. His mother greeted me and told Jiaqi to give me a tour of the apartment. I noticed that he had an open textbook on his desk, suggesting that he had been studying. The tour ended in

three minutes, and he told me that he was going to do work. I sat in a corner of the living room; Jiaqi was at his desk with his bedroom door open. Throughout the five hours I was there, Jiaqi left his room twice: once to go to the bathroom and another fetch a glass of water from the kitchen. He left his desk for a total of less than five minutes and sat at his desk for the entire afternoon. He did not move, did not eat, and did not talk to anyone. The apartment was silent except for the sound of him flipping pages of his textbook and writing homework.

This example shows that students adopted a strategy to navigate the unidimensional status system. Like Jiaqi, underachievers spent much effort in studying and sought to raise their status to become a Studyholic. Yet, simultaneously, the secrecy of their effort implied that they were careful to stay in the Underachiever group and not fall into the Loser group. In my observations, among all students, the Underachievers most frequently bashed the Losers likely because distancing themselves from the Losers would keep them from occupying the lowest position in the hierarchy.<sup>48</sup>

In addition to distinction between Underachievers and Losers, students distinguished Losers from all others, such as Studyholics. One example was Pan, a tall, slender girl with pale skin and short hair in Pinnacle. In a group interview with Pan and Haochen, I asked them to describe the school status system. After Pan answered in detail about the status hierarchy in school and the four status groups, I asked them to self-identify with one. Pan responded hesitantly that she was a Loser. Haochen seemed uncomfortable with her answer and gently suggested that she “probably qualified as a Studyholic.” Pan shook her head. She moved closer

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<sup>48</sup> Underachievers’ strategically bashing the Losers to self-distinguish from lowest status in the hierarchy is an example of the social identity theory, which emphasizes the dynamics in intergroup interactions (Hogg et al. 1995).



to the edge of the chair and went into a hunched back position. She explained to me in her usual soft voice,

“I am, uh, a Loser. I should be a Loser. I feel that I’m the type who never does well in tests. Sometimes I do, but mostly I don’t. But, but, I’m not a Studyholic. In 12<sup>th</sup> grade, [I] spent a lot of time studying, like all day and night. Even when we didn’t have class, I got up at 6:30, and went to bed after 10pm. The rest of the time, except for three meals a day in between, I studied all the time.”

Pan’s distinguishing the Losers from other status groups such as Studyholics was the norm among the students I observed. In this example as in others, students differentiated the Losers from the rest and often corrected others who misidentified peers’ status. The distinction was so important that even if others misrecognized one as having higher status, the student herself refused to accept their misplaced position and clarified that they had (significantly) lower status.

Pan, however, was an exception in that she readily identified as a Loser. In the schools I visited, the Losers primarily served as a reference group that allowed students to distance themselves from falling to the bottom of the status hierarchy. Unlike Pan’s self-identification into the lowest status group, the students in this study would mention the Losers in comparison to other groups, but refrained from labeling specific peers as one even when probed. One of the many failed attempts was a casual conversation with Mark.

Mark and I walked into the elevator. We had been talking about the Intellectuals, Studyholics, Underachievers and each groups’ overall SAT scores. As he reached to press the elevator floor, I asked casually, “Are there Losers in Capital?” Mark replied confidently, almost instinctively, “Of course! Every school has Losers, that’s for sure!”

Hearing that, I asked an example among his peers in school.

“Hmm...” Mark lowered his head and thought for a bit. At a split second, he pronounced a phoneme that seemed to be the beginning of a name, but he quickly stopped. Instead, he said with a smile, “Capital is basically pretty good. Our average scores are quite high.” As the elevator door opened, Mark pointed outside and said, “Our building is newly renovated. It’s especially nice!” He then walked out swiftly and joined his friends on the hallway.

Mark and other students used similar tactics, such as abruptly changing conversation topics or leaving conversation, to avoid naming peers as Losers. In this example as in others, Mark affirmed that the Losers existed in any school with the same hierarchy. He could name peers who belonged to the bottom of the status hierarchy even though he chose not to. In other words, in his mind, the Losers were distinguished from other groups in school.

### **The Irrelevance of Taste, Consumption, and Social Associations**

In the unidimensional status hierarchy based on test scores, school status was synonymous to social status. Scholars argue that elite students rely on taste or consumption to self-distinguish from others (Cookson and Persell 1985; Courtois 2013; Eckert 1989; Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009; Mijs and Pautelle 2016),<sup>49</sup> and that social associations are crucial to

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<sup>49</sup> Cultural capital takes on various forms in various fields, including literary preference, high cultural participation, interaction patterns, or participating in private tutoring (Bourdieu 1986; Byun et al. 2012; DiMaggio and Mukhtar 2004; Lamont and Lareau 1988; Lareau and Weininger 2003; Wang et al. 2006; Wu 2008). I choose to examine the (ir)relevance of taste and consumption because they are frequently examined in elite literature and have become general examples of elite student cultural capital (Cookson and Persell 1985; Khan 2011; Maxwell and Aggleton 2010; Milner 2016).

status (Eder 1985; Milner 1994, 2013, 2015).<sup>50</sup> However, none of these common indicators played a role in the unidimensional status hierarchy I observed.

Taste and consumption were clearly irrelevant to one's status in school. Students' de-emphasis on personal or stylistic taste may be due to the school policies that regulate student appearances. In China, students wear gender-neutral tracksuits. Due to school regulations, they cannot wear makeup, and cannot dye or perm their hair. Students were able to demonstrate taste in the foods they ate or the things they used. Being elite, many possessed goods that demonstrated their high socioeconomic background and class-based taste. Yet, owning expensive foreign goods and using high-end products were unrelated to status in school. Selena, a high performing girl, collected Nike shoes and shared pictures of her collection on social networking platforms. But so did Yenbo, a low performing boy in the same school. Neither student changed their status despite their similarly expensive taste.

The most telling example of the irrelevance of taste and consumption is perhaps Jina. Jina came from an elite family and had various high-end fashionable products. She was an attractive girl who had modeled for magazines and shared glamour shots on her social media platform. However, while she possessed goods that distinguished her from other students, she stayed a Studyholic in school. I observed Jina's 12<sup>th</sup> grade classroom on a Friday. It was self-study time; about one-third of the students had gone to the library or study rooms. Jina pulls out

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<sup>50</sup> Theoretically, status belief in society legitimizes cultural stereotypes of different groups, thereby shaping interaction patterns and stabilizing existing structures of inequality (Ridgeway 2014). Group separation in practice is observed among high school students in the U.S., who use friendship networks to form or change one's school status (Milner 2015). Students in different groups hang out at different places on campus, sit at different places in the cafeteria, and congregate in different areas in the auditorium. In many instances, breaking these invisible boundaries lead to the offending student being mocked, shunned, or feeling uneasy (Eckert 1989; Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009; Milner 2016). While students might explain that seating charts and gathering norms are individual friendship choices, scholars and the critical-minded students perceive these practices mark and uphold status boundaries in school.

goods worth approximately \$1,000, but rather than drawing students' attention, she was ignored.

Jina walked into the room, wearing a black trench coat, fashionable sunglasses, and a delicate gold necklace. She carried many bags with her and walked straight to her seat in front of mine. She first put down a large fancy-looking gold paper bag with large "bird nest" imprinted on top. She then put a large McDonald's paper bag and a cup of coffee on her desk. Without a word, she tossed her heavy-looking black leather tote bag on the vacant seat beside me. Standing beside her desk, she took off her white earpods and put them with the iphone on her desk. Turning toward the vacant seat beside me, she pulled out a paper box from the black leather bag. It was a large bottle of Honey Dew Body Cream from Elizabeth Arden. The rest of the classroom stayed quiet as Jina noisily went through all the products on her desk. Despite her walking around to hang her coat or borrow scissors, the 19 students in the room did not show any sign of interest. No one looked, no one talked, and no one paid attention to her or what she was doing.

Jina displayed high cultural taste and elaborate consumption, which scholars commonly defined as an element of cultural capital and observed among elite adolescents. Most of the classmates inferred from Jina's taste that she came from a wealthy background. Jina regularly gave birthday gifts to her friends and wore the expensive gifts she received in return—such as a Tiffany bracelet or brand-name perfumes. In this example, she bought a box of bird nests (the box was estimated to be at least 100USD) and bought takeout from McDonald's (which was relatively upscale in Beijing) rather than buying food from street vendors. She carried a leather tote bag instead of a backpack, used Elizabeth Arden instead of domestic brands such as Fupei, and owned an iphone instead of Chinese-brands such as Oppo.

However, although I amusedly took note of the various commodities she brought to class that afternoon, none of her classmates showed the slightest interest. Even the friend whom she borrowed from simply returned to studying after quietly handing her the pair of scissors. In this incident and most of the time in school, Jina received little attention from her fellow classmates despite her elitist taste and consumption. This example shows that cultural capital in the form of taste or consumption did not affect school status among the students I studied.

Similarly, status differences were unrelated to an individual's social network. Among the elite Chinese students in top-performing high schools in this study, students freely befriended peers from various status groups. Classrooms seating charts were cross-status. When I shadowed Lili, a Studyholic in Capital, I noticed that she regularly sat with a low-performing girl in class. The girl had asked questions in class that Lili thought were demonstrations of how the girl was unprepared for the *gaokao*. I asked Lili why she sat there and did not move to another spot in the room.

"Oh, our seats are basically determined in the first class of the semester. We don't change seats." She explained, with a stretched out index figure as if she were gesturing the number one. "In the first class, I arrived after she did, so I sat next to her. I sat there the entire semester. We don't switch seats."

Students did not freely choose their seats in the classroom. Teachers usually assigned seats for the students and shuffled students around periodically to foster friendship in the classroom. Even when students could decide on their seats, such as Lili's teacher who never assigned seats to students, the students did not do so. As in Lili's example, the students took

seats by time of arrival to the first class and stayed there for the entire semester regardless of friendship patterns or status positions.

In addition to sitting in mixed status groups, almost all of the friendship groups I observed consisted of cross-status friendship.<sup>51</sup> An example is Shiyong, the Intellectual in Capital. While Shiyong had a classmate, Dapeng, who was another Intellectual in school, the two were friendly but not very close. Dapeng hung out with Sinian, an above-average performing boy; Shiyong regularly had lunch with Liwa, an average-performing girl who was close to being an Underachiever. The status difference between Shiyong and Liwa was significant. Shiyong was so high performing that she was the so-called “superstar” who had elevated status in school. Teachers hoped she would be the highest scoring student in Beijing. By comparison, Liwa’s test scores were far below the admission cutoff score and she did not apply for THU or PKU. During classroom observations, Shiyong and Liwa (and other lesser performing students) had meals together, walked to PE class together, and Shiyong’s mother gave them rides home after parent-teacher meetings.

Like other friendship groups, Shiyong and Liwa remained in their respective status groups until the end of high school. Being best friends and visibly together all the time did not endow higher status among the low performer, nor did the close association with lower status peers result in downward mobility for the high performer. In these examples, unlike Bourdieu’s (1984) finding that status demonstrations exclude certain others from one’s group, social associations were irrelevant to status, and friendship patterns were inclusive of members of different statuses.

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<sup>51</sup> One reason for students to refrain from naming Losers in school might have been that they were generally friends with each other.

Even the closest relationship, such as dating, did not change a student's status. Tony and Tracy dated in high school, but Tony remained an Intellectual and Tracy a Studyholic throughout high school. Dapeng dated Jina, who was a Studyholic in the same classroom. While Jina later achieved Intellectual status by being the top scoring student in the Chinese subject in the *gaokao*, the two had started dating well before Jina's change in status. Robert, a solid Underachiever who scored 2050 in the SATs, pursued Samantha, the Intellectual who scored 2330 in the SATs. Samantha did not date him not for status reasons, but because she focused on preparing for college and was not interested in developing relationships. Robert later dated Stacey, a girl who was in between a Studyholic and Underachiever. The couple broke up soon after, not because Stacey scored 130 points higher than Robert in the SAT (they dated after the results were known), but for other reasons. Claire, another Intellectual with super-star status, even dated a Loser for a short while in high school.

In all of these examples, students freely befriended and dated others in their social circles. Because social associations did not threaten the unidimensional status hierarchy, social associations had very little status consequence and status distinction was not an exclusionary practice. The interaction patterns and associations I observed were distinctive to those in multidimensional status hierarchies, where members of high status often safeguarded their associations. This difference points out that members in a unidimensional status hierarchy often adopted distinctive behaviors and strategies when navigating the system. Specifically, social exclusion, which scholars perceived as crucial to status distinction in multidimensional status hierarchies, became irrelevant to status outcomes.

### **Benefits of High Status: Differential Treatment and Perceived Abilities**

Although status groups did not serve exclusionary purposes, students in different status groups received differential treatment from peers. Specifically, high status students were the center of attention among peers. They received peers' admiration, which in turn allowed high performers to be excused for behaviors that low performers were criticized of. Furthermore, students perceived their high status peers more favorably than their low status peers. Students entrusted high status students with public service roles in the student community irrespective of whether these students were interested or talented in administrative tasks, and they believed that high status students were the future elites in society. As I show below, status-based interactions and perceptions reflect the dominant role of test scores in students' unidimensional status hierarchy.

### *Differential Treatment*

#### Center of Attention

Just as test scores were at the center of student attention, the high performers were also at the center of peer attention. One of the students who had top status in school was Xijun Wu, a thin, fair-skinned girl who occasionally modeled for screen shots in Pinnacle. When I shadowed Xijun in PE class, a boy from another classroom approached me and asked the reason of my presence on the sports field. I replied that I was shadowing Xijun. Immediately, his eyes brightened and he started talking about Xijun with admiration. As I wrote in my field note excerpt:

"Xijun's like the star in our school. You know that, right?" The boy with spiky hair asked in a tone with noticeable admiration, "Xijun got into [the art school]! Before her, the last person in our school who got in was [a director], you know, he's now a famous director. And that was ages ago, nobody else had gotten in!" He went on talking about Xijun's



achievement. The conversation lasted about 10 minutes and ended when Xijun walked over.

Xijun only had very high status after she received the top score in the art exam. Xijun developed an interest in art and spent two years working on art projects, one of which won a national award. Because these activities took time away from exam preparation, Xijun was a below-average performer who did not have high status. Yet, in early spring semester of 12<sup>th</sup> grade, Xijun took the art exam (the format was multiple-choice questions on undesignated subjects) for the art school and was the top-scoring student among all applicants in China. When she received guaranteed admission to an art school that ranked within the top ten in the world based on her high test scores, her status immediately accelerated to near the top in Pinnacle. When I shadowed her, she had become the center of peer attention, as students turned their heads to look at her when she passed by in the hallway, and even students from other classes would strike up conversations about her.

Another example was Jina, a slender girl in Capital about 5'6 tall and who had been a part-time model before 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Jina was high-performing, but her test scores were not sufficiently high enough to qualify as an Intellectual. However, after Jina became the highest scoring student in Chinese language in the *gaokao* among the some 70,000 students in Beijing, her status immediately rose overnight to near top and she became the perfect example of an Intellectual. One year after Jina graduated, I asked Robert who had high status in the school. Robert replied without hesitation,

“Jina. She was exceptionally high-performing.” Without knowing that I knew Jina, Robert explained to me, “[She’s] like the ‘person of the year’ here, and she went to PKU. Jina only missed two points in the Chinese subject. She got a full score in her writing

composition. She only missed one multiple choice!” Seeing that I did not react in amazement, Robert looked me in the eye and emphasized, “She’s kinda famous.”

Robert and Jina were in different cohorts and departments. The two did not know each other personally. However, Jina’s achievement caught the attention of students such as Robert, who enthusiastically described the alumna’s legacy. Having become the highest scoring student, Jina became a celebrity among students. And like a celebrity capturing public attention, Robert and others noticed her accomplishments and publicized them.

Having very high status in school, some Intellectuals felt entitled to having elevated status and presumed other students’ attention. This mentality is clearest demonstrated when an Intellectual encountered unexpected inattention from others. Julie is a 12<sup>th</sup> grader who self-identified as an Intellectual in Central. On a chilly spring afternoon, Julie texted me and asked me to join her for dinner near her school. As we sat across each other in McDonald’s, she complained about how she talked to a student in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade cohort, but then found out that the person did not know her.

I was puzzled and asked, “He’s not in your cohort, why should he know you?”

Julie put down her drink, glared at me angrily and raised her voice, “You probably don’t know, but I’m famous in school. I am the top performing student. Maybe not always the top, but I am always in the top 10%.” She took a sip of her drink, and then added, “I’m also captain of the girls’ basketball team. How could anyone *not* know me?” Later in the conversation, Julie said she would ask her friends to “have a talk with him and keep him informed.”

Julie’s entitlement to peer attention was strong. For Julie, an Intellectual with highest status in school, distinction had become her due. As a result, when a student did not give her

the attention she felt she deserved, Julie reacted as if the younger student had deprived her of her right. In other words, the selected few at the top of the hierarchy received and often expected peers' focused attention.

### Peer Admiration

High status students enjoyed peer admiration while low status students did not. In my conversations with students, they frequently expressed respect and admiration for the top-performing peers. Mingjia explained how high test scores generate respect in school and used a metaphor of money to explain student status in school.

"I think that for people with good grades, others will come to you for test questions after a test, and you answer them. After a while, people will respect you more. I feel like test scores are like money in society...I'm not saying that rich people are most respected, but those with money get a bit more respect than those without."

For Mingjia, test scores harnessed respect from peers through a series of question solving. Because peers went to high-performers for answers, students who were able to solve questions are typically students with high test scores. In her opinion, test scores in school were analogous to money in society: the more the better, and the more one has, the more respect one gets.

Since the higher the test scores, the more respected the student was in school, even high performers expressed admiration to the comparably higher performing students. Yulang was a high-performer who was between an Intellectual and Studyholic. I visited Yulang after the *gaokao*. We sat in her living room and chatted over chocolate bars and tea that she prepared. Yulang walked me through her journey of *gaokao* preparation ending with her finally getting in to THU after taking the *gaokao*. After she told her story, Yulang said to me almost with a sigh, "I

really admire those who got higher scores than I did.” This comment surprised me because Yulang was very high performing. Hailed as one of the top students in Capital, Yulang was teachers’ ideal type of student. She received a *gaokao* score that put her at the 97.7% in Beijing and received 60 extra points on top of that. Yet, despite her achievement, she nevertheless “admired” the anonymous 2.3% Beijing students who out-performed her in the *gaokao*.

Other students also expressed the desire to be an Intellectual, even if they were already one. Ashley, a top performing girl in Pinnacle who her classmates identified and who self-identified as an Intellectual, indicated that she preferred to be an Intellectual than be in other status groups.

“I think that if a person doesn’t put much work into studying and still gets good grades, and consistently gets good grades, I’d want to be like that person.”

Ashley already had Intellectual status and attended Cambridge. However, she expressed admiration towards the students who were further on top in the status hierarchy (“I want to be like that”). This example, like the one before, indicates that test scores in a unidimensional status hierarchy was like a ladder with no end. The higher the test scores, the higher the status, and there were numerous enemies competing for higher status.

Oftentimes, the feeling of admiration sprang from students thinking that the Intellectuals were a type of students that peers were unable to mimic. In an interview, I asked Tracy if she felt positively toward any student in school and why. Tracy spun a bit in the spinning chair, playfully announcing that she “wanted to be like Tony” because he was top-performing. Worried that I would count her as biased due to their dating relationship, she then talked about a student in her cram school that she greatly admired. In a tone of awe, Tracy brightened up as she talked about the unnamed student:

“There’s this guy in Omega who went to Princeton. Needless to say, he has super high test scores. How do I put it, I think he’s exceptional. Matchless. Way beyond me. I admire him.”

In another interview, Wenbin expressed his sense of awe to the top performers in school:

“You see the Intellectuals doing so well in their studies, but you can’t learn from them, because they don’t study, and you don’t know how they did that. But they get such good grades every time, then [you] feel pretty helpless.”

Tracy and Wenbin were two high performers in school. Tracy had an SAT of 2200 and attended Johns Hopkins; Wenbin scored 691 out of 750 in the *gaokao* and went to THU. However, they identified even higher performing students whom they deeply respected. Because students perceived that they could not mimic an Intellectual’s behavior in hope of becoming one, peers often revered the Intellectuals in school.

Less-than top achievers also admired the high status students. Shuhua, the girl who corrected me about Ziyi’s Studyholic status, had a status close to a Studyholic. She expressed sincere respect to the Intellectuals over dinner one night.

Shuhua and I sat across each other in the school cafeteria. She had finished her meal and was patiently waiting for me to finish mine. As I tried to gulp down the last pieces of my fried chicken, Shuhua started talking about status differences among classmates in her top-performing classroom. Shuhua rested her chin on her left hand and said with a tone of adoration, “I really admire Shiyang. I admire her from the bottom of my heart, seriously. Her and Dapeng, I think these two do many things and do them well. They’re truly outstanding. I admire them.” But test scores were crucial in her assessment. I asked, “Would you admire them if they didn’t get high test scores, but still did many

things and did them well?” Shuhua lifted her head from her hand and responded immediately without even blinking, almost with a laugh, “Nope!”

When talking about Shiyong and Dapeng, Shuhua’s eyes lit up and had a dreamy look on her face. However, while she reasoned that they had the skills and ability to “do many things well,” her reaction to the question showed that she admired the two students primarily because they had very high test scores. In the next few years, when I visited Shuhua at Fudan University, she still remembered Shiyong’s achievements during high school and could recount many things that Shiyong accomplished.

### Excused Behaviors

As part of receiving peer admiration, high performers could behave in ways that lower performers could not. In fact, certain misbehaviors that high performers demonstrated became part of the reason for admiration. In two separate interviews, Pan and Lili spoke of two high status students and detailed why they admired them. Pan mentioned an acquaintance in the international department who went to Yale. In our conversation, Pan raised her voice and listed what she knew about the girl in a tone of admiration and higher pitch:

“This girl got number 1 in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade test. Her grades were always like that. She was always sleeping. She couldn’t get up in the morning, so she rushed to class without eating breakfast. She was sleeping through classes, never completed assignments, like that. But she always did exceptionally well.” With awe in her voice, Pan looked at me with her eyes widened and continued excitedly, “She transferred to the international department and later got into Yale!”

Likewise, Lili talked about a boy’s achievement even though she did not know him personally. As she said with enthusiasm and accelerated speech,

“There’s a guy, people tell me his name is Fangzhi Liu. He’s like the type, he plays basketball all night long. He only studies in mornings and afternoons. But he was still in the top band in the High School Olympiad! Now *that’s* an Intellectual!”

Being late, sleeping in class, not completing assignments, and playing basketball were demonstrations of superiority. However, other students who had the same behaviors were misbehaviors or signs of laziness. In a daylong observation, I joined Lili, Wanru, and Mei for lunch.

I sat down next to Lili, across from Mei and Wanru in the crowded and noisy cafeteria with our lunches, the girls started talking about the amount of work they needed to do to go through the day. It was just midday, but they felt overwhelmed already. Discussing which subjects to prioritize, Wanru, an Underachiever, revealed that she had stopped turning in her English practice tests. Mei and Lili gasped. Both of them raised their head from their dishes. Lili turned her head 90 degrees toward me, her long ponytail swaying to the other side, and repeated astonishingly, “She hasn’t turned in any English practice tests since [weeks ago]!” I mimicked her facial expression, raised my eyebrows and responded, “Wow!” Mei and Lili stared at Wanru, utterly surprised, and yelled at her, “How could you ever do that?!” They also warned her of the possible consequences for annoying the English teacher with statements like, “You won’t be able to get away with this!”

Lili and Mei’s reactions (gasping, yelling, and warning) suggested that students were policed by each other with regard to turning in assignments and other classroom behaviors. However, the same behavior did not result in identical reactions. Peers admired the top-

performing girl for not turning in assignments and being late. By comparison, they did not excuse Wanru for doing the same.

Similarly, who could play basketball and still be well-received depended on one's school status. In another observation, I saw Yang, an Underachiever, inviting others to join him for a basketball game at the end of the afternoon class period. However, he met strong resistance from classmates.

Yang, a tall, sturdy boy held a basketball in his hand and stood at the back of the room.

He cheerfully asked the students around him, all boys, if anyone wanted to join. No one in the classroom responded. Yang then approached a few boys individually at their desks. The first one politely said something like "Maybe another time." The second one had his eyes glued to a book and simply shook his head. Slightly discouraged, Yang asked a third classmate. By this time, students at the back of the classroom started to show signs of annoyance. Some raised their heads and gave Yang nasty looks. Two or three boys who sat beside the window started whispering. They likely said something offensive that provoked Yang to make gestures of slamming the ball at them. A boy who was whispering then stood up and yelled at Yang, "Shut up!" Yang became so angry that he threw the ball on the floor. He charged at the boy and knocked over a vacant desk. Three boys immediately rose up. They grabbed the two under their arms and separated them by force.

After Yang stormed off, I moved closer to the back of the room.

As a few boys tried to calm the one almost attacked. One of them disapprovingly commented, "We all need to study," he frowned, "He really shouldn't be asking. He himself shouldn't be playing!"



This example shows that actions that would otherwise count as demonstrations of an Intellectual's superiority over others were signals of Underachievers' inferiority. Playing basketball itself was neutral. However, peers admired the Intellectuals for spending their time on the court. By comparison, peers negatively commented on Underachievers for participating in the same activity.

One way of showing students' differential treatment toward each other according to status groups was through hypothetical situations in which a low status student received an unexpectedly high test score. I asked Yulang in an interview about her low-performing schoolmate, Kanghao, a skinny boy with narrow eyes who had very low test scores. Students looked down upon him and criticized him for frequently getting into fights and aggressively pursuing girls. During observations, the boys I observed often warned me not to talk to Kanghao and the girls dragged me toward the opposite direction if they saw Kanghao approaching from the other side. Yulang also felt Kanghao was an "odd ball" in school and minimized contact with him. I asked her whether Kanghao would be treated differently if he had very high test scores.

Yulang immediately responded in a matter-of-fact tone, "Of course. [We'd] be more tolerant of him. Or, a lot fewer people will talk about him as [negatively]."

Yulang's response showed that peers would have forgiven Kanghao of his undesirable behaviors in school. Because the students expressed willingness to treat him differently, this suggested that Kanghao's greatest "flaw" was not in fact his fighting and pursuing girls, but because he was very low-performing. Yulang was not alone in expressing their willingness to treat peers according to their test scores. In another interview, I asked Tracy how she felt about a low status classmate. She thought for a moment and then decided Kevin was a good example. In Tracy's words:

“That’d be Kevin. You don’t know Kevin. He never talks, never was a gregarious guy. He never hung out with us. Sometimes he disappears in the classroom during class.

Sometimes he grows his hair super long, with bangs over his eyebrows. Think about it, a guy, looking like that! His grades aren’t that good. Kevin, he probably got 1000-something in the SAT.”

I then asked how things would have changed if Kevin got a full score in the SAT. Tracy replied immediately,

“We’d still think he’s a weirdo, but we might admire him a bit more. If he got 2400 (full score) in the SAT, maybe [we] will feel like he shines when we see him, like that.”

Although Tracy did not specifically label the hypothetically high-performing Kevin as an Intellectual, her description (“he would shine”) was similar to how students often described other Intellectuals. Tracy’s affirmation that they would see Kevin in a vastly different light if nothing except for Kevin’s SAT scores changed further suggests that Kevin’s primary fault was being low-performing. Furthermore, Tracy’s description of Kevin was similar to how she and others described Tony, the intellectual. Both Kevin and Tony often disappeared from the classroom. Neither was gregarious, and neither regularly hung out with the classmates. The classmates criticized Kevin of his appearances, Tony’s friends also joked about his appearances, such as his weight and his ignorant smile that made him “look dumb.” Yet, while these attributes were part of the reason that classmates disliked Kevin, they were non-issues considering Tony’s Intellectual status. Tony was respected, admired, and peers wanted to be like him; but Kevin was ignored, spoken ill of, and peers did not befriend him, less to say wanted to be like him. These examples showed that high status students could behave in ways that the low performers were mocked for.

## *Different Perceived Abilities*

### Trust in Administrative Responsibilities

In addition to dominating peer attention and admiration, and being excused of behavior that would otherwise be criticized, students perceived high performers to have higher abilities in general. One example is the trust that students instilled in high status peers regarding administrative tasks related to the cohort's wellbeing. Tony, the Intellectual who undertook many assignments related to the cohort, summarized that students had a sort of "blind faith" in the high achievers that was similar to "discrimination" against the low-performers. During a daylong observation, I followed Tony to the student council.

A pile of books neatly lay on the ground at a corner of the room. The books were entitled, *Winning at Capital*, and had a picture of a student standing under a bright blue sky. Tony sat in a leather chair behind the desk, relaxed. With one hand behind his head, he pointed to the books with another and said sarcastically, "I contributed to that, you know."

The books were student biographies that Capital published to showoff student achievement. He then said that the book project was one of the many errands such as leading student trips, organizing school events, and various other things that teachers and peers asked him to do.

Tony sighed, "In [many] schools, if you can study well, [we] think you can do anything. Capital has this kind of discrimination, too."

While Tony was called on to perform various tasks unrelated to studying, he only grudgingly accepted the assignments that he failed to avoid. He did not want to write the biography, nor did he want to regularly lead student discussions in the social science club. However, peers and teachers entrusted him with these responsibilities and no other student

substituted for him. As a result, Tony found his calendar unnecessarily full and disliked his busy schedule.

However, many other students could not share Tony's burden even if they wanted to. Jiaqi, an Underachiever in Capital, was a hands-on, task-oriented type of student who was among the most skillful student negotiators I knew. I observed Jiaqi talk himself out of trouble in more than one instance. For example, I observed him talk his way out of getting his cell phone confiscated by Mr. Long in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. He knew how to play up his Beijing accent to stop vendors from forcefully selling him products on the streets of Beijing while other students grew annoyed. In college in France, he persuaded his academic advisor to withdraw his expulsion after flunking many subjects in the first semester.

However, despite Jiaqi's strong skills in negotiation and conversation, he was unable to serve his community in school. I walked with Jiaqi on campus on a sunny afternoon when he was in 12<sup>th</sup> grade. As we walked from his classroom to the cafeteria, he complained that someone had turned down his application—again—for a school-related task he aspired to take on.

Jiaqi complained with a frown, "There was some work that needed to be done for our cohort. This guy, Daifu, his ranking is about 70 to 80 [places] above mine. If you only look at administrative ability, we're pretty much the same. Actually, I might be better than him. But cohort-related work usually falls on him. It's quite difficult for students like me who rank further down to do things [for others] or to join the student council. From our perspective, [we] tend to trust those who rank higher."

In top high schools, the student council handled student affairs. While teachers in some schools appointed students, the student body usually elected the chair position through vote. According to Jiaqi, students entrusted high performers with these tasks related to the cohort. As

a result, although the tasks were generally administrative and unrelated to test performance, students would trust that the high performers also excelled in non-academic tasks. As a result, peers and teachers denied low-performing students service opportunities despite some of them possessing the skills and being eager to serve others.

Although uncommon, a few relatively low performers were able to join the student council. However, the other students did not approve of their presence in the student council. In a flag-raising ceremony toward the end of 12<sup>th</sup> grade in Capital, the teachers asked students to applaud the student council members for their service. This included Ruolun, an Underachiever.

A line of students, all members of the student council, boarded the podium. As the teacher called out their names, each student took a step forward and took a bow as the students on the sports field applauded. One of the last students was Ruolun. When the teacher called out “Ruolun,” the students did not immediately respond in applause. Instead, there were audible chuckles, gasps, and remarks, such as “*He’s in the student council?*” Seeing that Ruolun had bowed and was stepping back to the line, some of the faster-reacting students sparsely applauded him.

Ruolun’s case was an exception that proved the norm. The students on the sports field were surprised that Ruolun was one of the student council members. Their reactions (chuckles and gasps) showed that they questioned Ruolun’s qualification as a member of the student council. The ceremony ended within a few minutes. I joined the students exiting the sports field, although the students did not comment further, many of them walked back to the classrooms with a smirk on their faces.

In a unidimensional status hierarchy, possessing the one rewarded trait is to possess all that is needed for high status. When one equals everything, the single most important factor

overshadows all other factors and to demonstrate talent in the rewarded trait is to demonstrate talent in all aspects. Consequently, test scores in this system were so important that the students in this study perceived that the peers with high status were competent in everything else, regardless of their interest or ability in non-academic sectors.

### Predicting Future Elite Status

Among the students I studied, high status and high test scores were important predictors of one's future socioeconomic status. Although the students had no evidence that high school test scores and future status are statistically associated, less to say causally related, they embraced this idea firmly by understanding the high value of test scores in adult society. In our interview, Na, a high-performing girl in Central, explained how students in general perceived *gaokao* scores to have life-long consequences:

"Let's say that PKU has a cutoff score of 660, but you went to a school that took in people with just 600. From this very moment, your lives would have a different starting point. It's like if you graduated from Harvard. Can you say it's the same as any other university in the U.S.? Can you? No. They're not the same. You'll go to different internships, different companies, you'll have different careers, right? Just by saying 'I'm from PKU' gives you a different starting point."

Surprised by her articulateness, I asked how she acquired that information.

Na seemed surprised at my follow up question. She tilted her head to think for a moment. Then she shrugged and replied, "I don't know. It came naturally, like [from] parents, classmates, [and] friends."

Like her peers, Na believed that students accepted to PKU had advantages in internship, occupation, and overall career trajectory. Na's comment was similar to Rivera's (2015) findings

that student from top universities had different career opportunities at the beginning of their careers. The linkage between high status in school and high status in the future suggested that students were highly oriented toward the future and were attuned to adult emphasis on test scores.

Fei, a high performer in Pinnacle who later attended THU, also expressed that test scores held status value in the adult society. I visited Fei at his house after the *gaokao*. We sat at the dining room, each with a cup of tea, and chatted about summer plans and high school memories. When I asked him if he had any regrets about high school life, he suddenly turned silent. I awkwardly picked up my cup, took an unnecessarily long sip of tea, and wondered how long I should wait before changing the topic.

Fei had both hands on his cup. Still staring at the table cup, he spoke slowly, “I want to change the way society evaluates a person.” Although it was not what I had anticipated, I asked him to elaborate, “How does society evaluate a person?” He exhaled. Looking into my eyes, he said, “Take Ashley for an example. You know her, right? She’s going to Cambridge. Have you heard?”

Ashley was an Intellectual at Pinnacle. She and Fei were former classmates who regularly chatted online about college applications and decisions. The good friends had shared with each other their participation in my research. In my interview with Ashley, she reported her most stressful moment in high school being when she had to decide between accepting the offer from Carnegie Mellon or Cambridge. I did not bring up this information, but she had shared her concerns with Fei.

I nodded. Fei continued in a serious tone, “I think she’s outstanding. But if she didn’t get into a top, world-class university and be amongst the top achievers, she’d be nobody.

Thank goodness she got in to Cambridge. It's a matter of social status. Like that Carnegie Mellon, it sure isn't well known. And in China, Cambridge is much more persuasive in [signaling your] ability. Heck, why do we evaluate these things like this?" He groaned and then shrugged. "I personally think doing math in Cambridge is much better than [majoring in] computer science in Carnegie Mellon. [Cambridge] is such a better learning environment that who'd care about the major.

In our conversation, Fei disliked the way "society evaluates people," which was judging a person's ability by the university he or she attended. The quote from Fei pointed to two key aspects of the unidimensional status hierarchy. First, despite being critical of the system, students understood that no other criteria were comparable to college placement in signaling one's ability. Second, the explanation showed that students consciously strategized to navigate the unidimensional system. College was crucial to status, but not the field of major. Thus, choosing a less prestigious major in an internationally top-ranked university was preferable to going to a world top-ranked department in a relatively less well-known university. In other words, the students in this study not only constructed a unidimensional status hierarchy, but also acted according to the structure of the hierarchy.

### **Justifying the Hierarchy: An Innate Ability Argument**

The elite students in this study narrowly conceptualized individual's intelligence as test scores and justified the school status system with an innate ability argument. Being in school with peers up to 15 hours each day, the students shared the same schedule and workload. However, certain peers consistently outperformed others despite all being selected into the top high schools and mutually focusing on test preparations. In this context, students' described the



unobserved factors that contributed to differences in test scores as differences in innate ability.

When asked to explain the existence Losers, Mingjia Song brought up the Intellectuals as a comparison without prompting and attributed the reason students were in different status groups to genes:

Me: What do you think about students who study hard but don't do as well?

Mingjia: I feel that effort is a somewhat related factor, but I think it's probably genes.

Me: Genes? (Raised voice)

Mingjia: Maybe not all because of genes. It's related to thinking habits, living habits.

Me: How so?

Mingjia: Just, some people might, I think there are people who are born smarter. Maybe they had better development in school or they had parents who better educated them. I have no idea how they became like that. Many people, they just have the ability to think. Like, if the teacher says something, he will think a lot about it upon hearing it in class, and then he figures out a lot more. So [he] doesn't need to do as much work.

Mingjia first implied that Losers were born to be intellectually weaker ("it's probably genes"). Sensing my bewilderment, she toned down her argument by mentioning that social factors (habits, school, and family) might have played a role. However, she then returned to her initial argument of innate ability ("there are people who are born smarter").

Other students shared the same argument and expressed it in various ways. For example, students often described Intellectuals as "smart," "casually getting full scores on all AP subjects," or having "high IQ" or "superb brainpower." Explaining why Intellectuals were

Intellectuals, Jiaqi and Jianmin both attributed the Intellectuals' unexplainably high test scores to innate ability:

"Intellectuals are Intellectuals because their IQ is too high, they don't even need to listen to [lectures in] class." (Jiaqi)

"Intellectuals are like, you're studying hard, but not this person. He might be online gaming or something. Maybe like this. He has higher ability, [you] can't do anything about it. [You] can't explain it, it's [just] that. It's [being] very smart." (Jianmin)

Jiaqi and Jianmin both adopted terms that supported the innate ability argument ("IQ," "ability," "smart"). While there was no evidence of innate differences among peers, the students in this study considered it to be a sufficient explanation for variation in student performance. In their statements, although they also acknowledged the role of diligence ("you're studying hard"), diligence was of secondary importance to ability because it did not seem to have a direct association with test scores. As Jianmin explained, hard work failed to explain why the Intellectuals were high performing and why the diligent student (oneself) was not. Students thus rationalized status outcomes by attributing differences to unobserved characteristics, which was innate ability.

Students used the same argument to explain Losers' low test scores. I sat beside Xiaolong, an 11<sup>th</sup> grade Underachiever, in the winter. It was almost dinner time and he was packing up his books in the black backpack that hung on the back of his chair.

Xiaolong put his hands on the empty desk. He seemed as if he had nothing to do. Then, he slowly turned and faced me. With his right arm on the back of his chair, left elbow on his knee, he looked at me and struck up conversation, "Hey, have you ever heard of a Studyholic?"

At the time I had not fully understood the hierarchy and how it shaped students' daily lives. After he explained the unidimensional hierarchy and the four status groups, he shared with me that he was an Underachiever. I asked why he didn't want to work hard in his studies. Xiaolong immediately drew in a breath and said,

"I'm not a Loser, hell, no. Studying that hard and still not getting good results means there's something wrong with that person's brains. It's just bad. It's always better to be an Underachiever than a Loser. I'm an Underachiever. See, I don't study that much, that's why I don't do as well. It's not because I'm stupid."

Like the others, Xiaolong expressed that Losers were born untalented ("something wrong with their brains," "stupid"). In another observation, I asked Joe, a student at Pinnacle, about his opinion on each status group. Joe was a member of the high status groups in Pinnacle and he did not comment on what justified his high status. However, when I asked him what he thought about the Losers, he answered immediately, within a blink of an eye, that they were intellectually inferior.

We stopped at an intersection and waited to cross the street. I asked him about how he felt about the Losers in school. The light turned green within seconds. Seeing that we could cross, Joe turned towards me and smiled broadly, showing his teeth. He simply and bluntly said, "[They've] got problems with their brains." He then turned around and quickly crossed the street.

Joe was one of the many students who attributed Loser status to their innate (dis)ability ("problem with their brains"). From Joe's reactions, the explanation was so obvious that he did not think twice before delivering. Like him, most students drew on this argument as if it were true and did not think these descriptions were close to verbal bullying.

Students drew on the same argument with various terminologies. In four separate interviews.<sup>52</sup> Tony, Ashley, Jiaqi, and Shuhua respectively expressed that Losers were destined to be Losers:

“They’re retarded.” (Tony)

“Because they didn’t find the way, or they have psychological issues. Actually, smartness is a way of studying.” (Ashley)

“It’s a problem of IQ. They study all day long but there’s no effect. These people are hopeless.” (Jiaqi)

“It’s all fate. I thought about this question really seriously. ...There’s a certain degree of inevitability. But if you think about it, it really is like this. There’s nothing you can do about it. Nothing you can do.” (Shuhua)

Despite the different terminology (“IQ,” “have psychological issues,” “retarded,” or “fate”), all of these quotes suggested that Losers were low performing because they lacked intelligence. With this narrative, Losers were distinguished from the rest of the groups not simply because they had the lowest status in the hierarchy, but also because they were innately inferior from the rest of the students.

The students who shared this argument came from various positions in the status hierarchy. Ashley and Tony were Intellectuals; Joe and Mingjia were between Intellectuals and Studyholics; Shuhua was almost a Studyholic; Xiaolong and Jiaqi self-identified as Underachievers; and Jianmin belonged to the Loser status. Despite their different status positions and resulting differential treatment, all of the students adopted and agreed with the explanation. The

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<sup>52</sup> Students agreed with the genetic explanation, although girls were gentler in explaining why certain students had Loser status than boys. Boys typically used terms such as “problem with their brains,” “IQ,” or “stupid.” Girls chose their words more carefully, such as referring to the Losers as being psychological “disturbed” or “ill fated.”

unidimensional status hierarchy was thus a powerful system of classification, since students from both ends of the hierarchy sustained and justified the system.<sup>53</sup>

The innate ability argument accounted for why some students had low status, but it also accounted for why others did not. As mentioned previously, students avoided naming peers as Losers. When confronted with a situation that they almost specified a friend as one, students drew on the genetic explanation as a way out. I shadowed Robert one afternoon at the end of spring in 12th grade. He had been telling me that he and Song, a good friend of his, were going to attend George Washington University. He mentioned that his placement put him as an Underachiever, so I asked if Song was one as well. Robert explained hesitantly, apparently choosing his words carefully:

“[She’s] more like an Underachiever, I mean, she doesn’t really study. But then, she does study quite a bit. Like, she has lots of tutors, like those in [a large cram school]. So you can’t say she’s an Underachiever. Yeah.”

I then asked if Song was a Loser, since she seemed to fit the definition as implied in his comments.

Robert quickly shook his head and replied, “No, not really. I mean, at least our IQ shouldn’t be low. And at least we’re in the better-performing classes in Capital.”

Robert emphasized Song having high IQ to avoid labeling her as a loser. Ironically, the vagueness and a lack of evidence of this argument allowed students to manipulate the same

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<sup>53</sup> This justification is similar to Murray and Herrnstein’s (1996) argument in *The Bell Curve*. Murray and Herrnstein analyzed a multidimensional status hierarchy. However, while the same argument is adopted in two different hierarchies, the difference is that students in the multidimensional status hierarchy can point to other strengths they have, while the students in a unidimensional status hierarchy cannot. One would expect the social psychological effects to be different for students in the two hierarchies. Examination of this question, however, is beyond the scope of this study.

explanation into the opposite direction. As this example shows, Roberts conveniently drew on reasons of IQ to promoting Song above the Loser status.

As part of their emphasis over individual innate ability, students de-emphasized the importance of hard work compared to individual ability even when not explicitly discussing the status hierarchy in school. Jianmin and I talked about the relationship between hard work and high test scores over lunch after the *gaokao*. Discussing how to get high test scores in a particular subject, I presented the idea that hard work often led to high test scores. However, Jianmin disagreed with the suggestion that hard work was the primary reason for getting high test scores. Instead, he used a genetic explanation and deemphasized the role of effort.

Substituting high test scores as “success,” Jianmin disagreed with a chuckle, “If effort equaled success, then success would be way too easy.” He continued, “If effort meant success, then I could just work hard. If everyone worked hard, then everyone would succeed. But that’s not possible. So there’s no way effort is equal to success. There are a lot of other things, such as luck.” He took a sip of tea from his cup and added, “And IQ, or intelligence, that’s also important.”

Jianmin suggested that “luck,” “IQ, or intelligence” and not hard work were the primary reasons for explaining high test scores. Jianmin’s claim reflected students’ overall de-emphasis on hard work and their belief that academic performance is genetically determined. Jianmin and other low status students supporting the hierarchy showed that members of all status groups supported and justified the status hierarchy.

In the unidimensional status hierarchy based on test scores, students with low status lacked alternative means to pursue upward mobility and needed to explain their relatively low performance in a direct manner. By attributing low test scores to uncontrollable factors, namely,

innate ability, low status students avoided taking responsibility for their relatively low test scores. Simultaneously, high status students adopted the same argument that elevated their status to an unmatched height. Students with high status had the motivation to support the system, but those with low status were also motivated to sustain the system from the other end of the hierarchy.

## **Summary**

Elite students in top performing Chinese high schools established a unidimensional status hierarchy with test scores and sorted each other into four different status groups (Intellectuals, Studyholics, Underachievers, and Losers) according to each other's test performance. In this context, the students developed strategies and interaction patterns to mark status boundaries and interacted according to the setup of the system. Students with high status did not benefit from socially excluding others as observed in the American multidimensional status hierarchies (Eder 1985; Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009; Milner 2015; Weis et al. 2014). Rather, high status instilled other benefits to its holders, such as admiration, excused misbehaviors, confidence in one's general ability, and likelihood of success in future endeavors. By connecting school status to future social status, the elite students in this study were highly attuned to future socioeconomic outcomes in the adult world. To justify the unidimensional status hierarchy and explain the variation in test scores they observed, students in different status groups adopted a genetic argument that attributed status outcomes to uncontrollable, unobserved characteristics. This argument allowed the low performers to pardon themselves of their continuous failure in competition against the high performers and

elevated high performers' status. As a result, both dominant and subordinate student groups were motivated to and indeed strongly supported the school status hierarchy.



## CHAPTER 5

### FLAUNTING ACADEMICS, FLOUTING TEACHERS

Elite students' unidimensional status hierarchy in top Chinese high schools were not only established, sustained, and justified by the members within the hierarchy, but also supported by adults who interact with students on a daily basis. Teachers are among the key adults who express to students the characteristics and expectations valued by society-at-large. The teachers in this study contributed to sustaining student hierarchies by providing differential treatment to students according to their test scores and (by extension) status positions. High performers regularly received favors from teachers and could actively defy teachers. By contrast, low performers routinely received comparably less attention and were highly respectful to teachers. Through everyday interactions, teachers fostered a strong sense of entitlement among high performers but impeded low performers from demonstrating entitlement. Because school status depended on test scores, differential treatment based on test scores strongly resembled treatment based on school statuses. Although the teachers did not explicitly acknowledge the student status hierarchy, nor did they use the terms of student status groups, they conveyed a clear message to students that test scores shaped the type of treatment by adults. Through routine daily interactions with teachers, student status in school becomes relevant to social status in adult society.

#### **High Status Student Entitlement: A Telling Example**

I first joined a classroom of 32 students in Capital on a chilly winter morning. The classroom was bright and warm, the setting was pleasant. The creamy-white floor tiles were

polished so that they reflected the sunlight shining through the large double-rowed windows. Across the other side, the white classroom walls near the hallways were filled with colorful posters: a timeline of Chinese historical events, a world map, a map of China, and a graphic demonstration of eye exercises, which the students regularly skipped. *Gaokao* and rankings based on test scores dominated the classroom. Lining the wall toward the back were printouts of students' exemplary essays and lists of rankings in the classroom, which detailed students' test scores, current ranking, and change in ranking since the last test. At the very back of the room were two PCs, a dark wooden cabinet filled with books that organized questions from previous *gaokao*, and a red plastic drawer that overflowed with sheets of test papers. The only thing that seemed unrelated to the *gaokao* was a set of three large stuffed animals— smiling alpacas— and a laughing Spongebob that cheerfully sat on top of a stack of test papers. These stuffed animals were less decorative than functional: they also served mainly as pillows for students who needed a short nap between their studies.

I walked in at 9 AM sharp. Students had already gone through one class and an hour of self-study when it was time for Mrs. Mao's geography class. Students were quietly hunched over their cream-colored desks, ready to take notes, as Mrs. Mao briskly walked into the classroom. This class, like almost half of their classes, was a test review session in which the teacher stood at the blackboard and discussed questions that appeared on a test taken a few days ago. One question was about the construction of the Xiamen-Shenzhen Railway. Mrs. Mao explained that the railway, originally designed on the coastlines, had to move inland due to military concerns. "But it only moved one kilometer inward? This explanation is too far-fetched!" Gao, a boy with spiky hair and dark-rimmed glasses who sat near the front, loudly interrupted Mrs. Mao. "It should be like that other railway that moved a lot further!" Another girl at the left side of the

room shouted in agreement. There was a hustle in the room as students started refuting Mrs. Mao's answer.

Mrs. Mao tried to explain. But before she could say anything, Dapeng, a boy who sat at the far back of the room, lifted his head, looked at her, and said quietly but firmly, "Let me [answer]. I can talk about this for a bit." Mrs. Mao froze for a split second, bewildered. "Fine," she said as she awkwardly put down the piece of chalk in her hand. Dapeng rose from his seat and murmured quietly, "I can probably explain this clearer." The students sitting close to him and I were stunned. The girl left of Dapeng lifted her head from the desk and took a breath dramatically as her eyes widened. Others silently stared at Dapeng with their chins lowered as he walked towards the blackboard. Mrs. Mao was stone-faced. Dapeng quickly erased what Mrs. Mao wrote in the manner of a teacher denouncing a student's incorrect answer. He then drew a map of the coastline and explained the question. Afterwards, Dapeng tossed the chalk and said, "So this is basically it. It's really socioeconomic changes that led to the construction of this railroad." Stone-faced, Mrs. Mao nodded and said in English, "Thank you." Mrs. Mao continued class as if nothing had happened.

The episode greeted me on my first day in Capital and led me to anticipate frequent outbursts that showed off student entitlement or defiance against teachers' authority. There were also other reasons for my anticipation. Elite student entitlement in academically top-performing high schools is common in literature. In the U.S., with few exceptions (Demerath 2009), elite high school students demonstrate entitlement in school and teenagers in general defy teachers in the classroom (Coleman 1961; Cookson and Persell 1985; Foley 1990; Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009; Khan 2011). As for Chinese students, some scholars have argued that the Confucian tradition and focus on exams led to student obedience toward teachers

(Carson and Nelson 1996; Hui 2005; Tsegay and Ashraf 2015), but others have provided accounts of Chinese student disobedience or extreme levels of defiance (Shi 2006; Walder 2009; Yang 2016).<sup>54</sup>

In my observation, students were respectful of teachers and showed respect to teachers on a daily basis. The students in the schools I visited greeted teachers in the hallways. Student compliance was normative and a teacher's presence in the classroom was sufficient to grasp student attention. When a teacher entered a classroom, he or she only needed to stand in front of the room; the students would quickly hush each other. Classes often started with the class leader telling every student in the classroom to stand up, bow, and greet the teacher by chanting in unison this formulaic greeting: "Good morning/afternoon, Mr. /Ms. So-and-so (teacher's name)." Students in top performing schools rarely dozed off during class. Overall, unlike the stereotypically rowdy American classrooms (Foley 1990; McFarland 2001, 2004), students in these Chinese classrooms were well behaved and quiet. These students needed minimal teacher supervision and were quick to respond to teacher instructions. Even the exception proved the rule of high respect to teachers. In a 12th grade meeting at Pinnacle, a teacher publicly criticized a girl for sending a one-line text message to ask for permission to skip class. The student had texted: "I don't feel well, I'm not coming to class today." Many of the students gasped or tittered upon hearing this incident. It was clear that this behavior was disrespectful. Instead, the expected text should have greeted the teacher, apologized, explained the situation, and then asked for permission or forgiveness.

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<sup>54</sup> Examples of Chinese students defying teachers are especially prominent during the Cultural Revolution. Walder (2009) and Yang (2016) show that Chinese students in academically top high schools struggled against teachers. While the Cultural Revolution is history for the students in this study, it was possible that student defiance against teachers may have survived as a reminiscent legacy.

I also found that high schools fostered a strong sense of entitlement among elite students by showering them with praise and adoration. For example, Capital's motto was "Change the world," which implied that students were to assume leadership in the future. I heard teachers tell students, "All of you have the potential to be the prime minister. See, you guys gave good answers to the questions that even our prime minister couldn't answer." Capital held weekly student-principal meetings, where a group of 7-10 students could communicate their concerns to the principal and make recommendations on school or classroom policies. Similarly, Pinnacle cultivated students' sense of entitlement by having teachers constantly remind them that they were superior to other students. Pinnacle teachers would frequently say, "We are Pinnacle," "We are clearly much better than others," or "We are still top in the district." I also observed teachers telling students "The goal for [others] is too low for us, so we've set a more adequate, higher standard" and "Your average score should be the full score" in many subjects. Even the campus environment contributed to students' strong sense of entitlement. For example, Emperor had stone carvings that displayed the school's connections with the Chinese political and academic elites, top universities, and foreign missionaries since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. These interactions and campus artifacts were daily reminders to students of their eliteness.

Since entitled and respectful behaviors were not mutually exclusive, the question was not whether elite students in top high schools defied or showed respect toward teachers, but when and why. In the example above, Dapeng was one of the few Intellectuals who had very high status in school. He was the top student in a mock exam, received 60 extra points through the principals' recommendation, and eventually attended PKU. Even Gao, the student who interrupted and questioned Mrs. Mao's answer, was a Studyholic who later went to THU.

Dapeng and Gao might have been two among the many students who thought highly of themselves. Yet, what was striking was the degree to which Dapeng demonstrated strong entitlement and defied teachers. He openly suggested that Mrs. Mao was incompetent by publicly claiming that she was unable to explain test questions. He also ignored the teacher's visible signals of annoyance, treated the teacher as if she were the student, and took over class.

### **Fostering Entitlement among High Status Students**

Students and teachers reported instances of mutual clashes, but the main actors in their stories were usually students with high status in school. One example among many was Xijun Wu, a slender, long-haired girl who had top status at Pinnacle. Xijun was involved in an argument with her homeroom teacher over filming the classroom for her art project. Xijun did not have a very good relationship with her homeroom teacher, Mr. Liu. In Xijun's words,

"My relationship isn't that good with him (Mr. Liu). Actually, most people in my classroom don't get along with him. We often trash talk each other, Mr. Liu and I. I would trash talk him, and he'd trash talk me."<sup>55</sup>

In addition to trash talking the teacher, Xijun and Mr. Liu fell into serious conflict when Xijun wanted to document daily interactions in the classroom as a practice piece for art school applications. Xijun was surprised to encounter pushback from teachers who did not wish to be on camera. In our interview, Mr. Liu, her homeroom teacher, recalled:

"I reminded her [that] it's good to be filming things, but it's better to communicate with the teachers before you do it. Maybe she talked to some teachers. Some teachers told her that they advised against filming [the classroom]. They didn't [want] her to do that.

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<sup>55</sup> Trash talk meant speaking ill of the person, such as saying him or her knew nothing or was good for nothing.

But as long as she wanted to [do] something, no one could stop her. Not even when the teacher didn't allow it. She was still going to do it. I got into an [intense argument] with her for this, I yelled at her. I really did." Mr. Liu paused and looked into my eyes, making sure that I understood the seriousness of the incident, "But that was useless. Useless."

He ended with a faint smile and leaned back against his chair.

A few days later, as we walked around campus on a hot summer afternoon, we saw Xijun taking pictures of classmates and the campus. I casually asked if she had done the same to her teachers.

She replied, "Yeah, I did. Most teachers were fine with it. But Mr. Ye (the history teacher)! *Him!* He wouldn't allow it without a reason! Mr. Liu scolded me for that. At one point, Mr. Ye just stood there and refused to lecture when I had the camcorder on."

She shrugged. "But who cares. I did it anyway. They were against it for no good reason."

In this example, Mr. Liu failed to keep Xijun's behavior in line with teacher expectations.

While Mr. Liu could have contacted her parents, publicly criticized her, or initiated other punishments, he chose to reprimand Xijun and excused her behavior as strong-mindedness ("as long as she wanted to [do] something, no one could stop her"). While Xijun might indeed be iron-willed, she did not seek to explain her behavior to the teacher, for example by claiming that the project was crucial to honing her skills and useful for her college application. Rather, she shrugged off Mr. Liu's reprimand, decided that teachers who disagreed with her were unreasonable, and carried on filming classrooms.

Sometimes, students with top status were unpunished even when they exhibited seriously problematic behaviors. One example is Weicheng, a top performer at Emperor. When I first met him, Weicheng told me that he was a descendent of the Aisin Gioro family (the Qing

royal family) and that his grandparents changed last names to avoid persecution during the Cultural Revolution. His teachers told me that he came from a wealthy family and emphasized that Weicheng was a top performer. In fact, one teacher openly acknowledged that Weicheng was her favorite student and that the reason they chose to introduce him to me was because he was top-performing. I met Weicheng in the common room, the spot that the school allowed me to stay for a short period during each visit. In those brief moments, I found Weicheng's interactions with teachers straightforward and sometimes rude.

After our interview, a teacher walked into the room and told him to get back to class. Weicheng turned his head to the door to check who it was, then immediately turned back to face me. He flicked his right hand in the air without looking at the teacher and shouted, "Hold on, hold on!" The teacher awkwardly smiled at me and promptly left the room. A few minutes later, Mrs. Tang, Weicheng's biology teacher, came and ordered him to get back to his classroom.

I thought Weicheng would leave with the teacher. However, he did not.

Weicheng did not move. He looked at her and then turned back to me. He rolled his eyes and made a time-out gesture with his hands to Mrs. Tang, loudly saying, "Hold on! Hold on!" Mrs. Tang sighed and left the room. A few minutes later, his teacher came yet again and, visibly angry, told him to go back to class. Weicheng slouched in the black sofa. Seeing that the teacher had become angry with him, he asked not to go to class. The teacher frowned and walked toward him. Without a word, she grabbed him by the arm out of the sofa and firmly pushed him out of the room.

I was surprised that the teachers would come to fetch Weicheng three times. When teachers came to remind other students at Emperor that classes were starting, they usually left



immediately or wrapped up what they were saying and headed out in one or two minutes.<sup>56</sup>

Students who were not present in the classroom were marked as absent, which would leave a bad record in their files. However, instead of marking him absent, the teachers came to fetch Weicheng not twice, but *three* times. In this example, Weicheng was entitled and rude toward the teachers. However, the teachers tolerated his rudeness and showed favor by protecting him from a recorded absence.

Weicheng's entitlement was more than rudeness toward teachers. After they left, Mrs. Tang came into the room to chat. She told me that Weicheng had gotten himself into trouble a week ago with a gym outside the school.

"Weicheng and his buddy, I guess they were studying until it was late. They wanted to hit the gym. So they went there, but it was too late and the gym was closed. When people see that a gym is closed, they usually just walk away, right?" I nodded in agreement. Mrs. Tang continued, "Right, [they] come back another time. But not Weicheng. He got angry and kicked the door of the gym. It was a glass door. He kicked it so hard that it shattered. All of this was caught on the surveillance camera, and [people at] the gym saw his school uniform and came to us. Now the school needs to deal with it. We had to tell the gym 'oh, he's a 12<sup>th</sup> grader, he's stressed out preparing for the *gaokao*,' things like that." She frowned and said furiously, "I saw him in class the next day – he didn't look apologetic at all! He even looked proud! Apparently no one talked to him about this!"

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<sup>56</sup> My role in Emperor was that of a researcher. Students who met with me did so during lunch breaks at the common room. Our meetings could not take time away from course schedules and did not count as valid excuses for skipping class.

During another visit to Emperor, I asked two other students what they thought about the incident. There was a brief moment of awkward silence as the two looked at each other to see who would respond first.

Fangyu, a below-average-performing bubbly girl, rolled her eyes and said lightheartedly, “Yeah, it happened. But it’s not a big deal. He does this sort of thing all the time.” The other classmate nodded in agreement. I then asked if the school contacted Weicheng’s parents; they both said no.

In this incident, Weicheng had an outburst of anger that led to vandalism. Yet, while teachers and other students acknowledged his behavior as problematic, Weicheng was unreprimanded. Mrs. Tang reported that the school handled the situation and, despite her annoyance, Weicheng was not held accountable. According to other students, it was likely not the first time that Weicheng got himself into trouble (“he does [it] all the time”). Even so, teachers minimized the severity of his problematic behavior and took care of the consequences for him. This example shows that top-performing students were not accountable and suffered no consequence in school for their behaviors.

Top-status students also demonstrated their entitlement by refusing to do what their teachers asked. Most students were quick to follow teachers’ orders and did not use their cell phones in school. They ran errands for teachers without complaint, including delivering things to other students or making posters for the school. However, top-status students frequently responded differently. One example was Tony, an Intellectual admitted to Cornell.

The daylong observation started with Tony slouched on the bright blue sofa in the student study room. He was complaining about participating in a school project that matched students to working with professors in biology. He wanted to drop out half-

way through because “it was a waste of time” and did not help with college applications. Since his teachers asked him to stay, he grudgingly finished the project. However, he then found out that he had to prepare for a project defense. He said to me firmly, “To hell if I’m going to my project defense. It’s such a waste of time.” I asked if he had consulted his teacher. He replied with a deep frown, “I called and said that I’d rather die than go. I already did what was told just so Mr. Fang (his teacher) wouldn’t look bad.”

Tony spent every break that morning contacting Mr. Fang and telling him about his decision to withdraw from the project. Around noon, Mr. Fang came looking for him in the student study lounge.

Mr. Fang swiftly sat down across Tony and said softly, “I talked to [people at the workshop] last night. They were concerned. I’d thank you if you went. You don’t need to prepare anything. You already have a PowerPoint from an earlier presentation, right?” Mr. Fang asked. Tony responded with a nod but stayed silent. “Then just read what you have. You can leave immediately after you’re done. I’d do you wrong if you were to spend more time anyway. I promise this is the last time.” Tony went still silent. Mr. Fang quickly left the room, the corner of his black windbreaker flapping behind him.

As soon as Mr. Fang was out of sight, Tony complained loudly. He seemed irritated by Mr. Fang.

Tony minced his lips and banged the back of his head on the back of the chair.

Mimicking Mr. Fang’s soft voice, ““This is the last time. I promise this is the last time.””

Tony then barked, “It’s already been the last time for three times!” When I mentioned that Mr. Fang looked sincere, Tony glared at me and snared, “These teachers know how to fake [their feelings]! He was totally faking it! [Teachers] fake their feelings and get kids to do what they want!”

Tony spent his afternoon classes drafting an argument against going to his project defense. He used his breaks to ask a senior teacher for support. By the end of the afternoon sessions, Tony had reached a resolution: "Play dead. Just don't go no matter what."

Eight hours after his complaint, Tony cornered Mr. Fang in a noisy hallway. After hearing his petition, Mr. Fang said loudly, "I can't do anything if you guys are determined not to go." As we watched Mr. Fang storm away angrily, Tony let out a sigh of relief.

"Everything's fine now," he said. He smiled broadly and looked proud.

Student entitlement was common among top performers. In this example, Tony demonstrated a very high degree of entitlement and forced his way out even though Mr. Fang had begged him not to. In Tony's perspective, he had done Mr. Fang a favor and felt entitled to withdraw the favor as he pleased. Although Mr. Fang was the teacher and had authority over Tony, the interaction I observed suggested that Tony enjoyed a higher position than Mr. Fang did.

Teachers often spent more effort on assisting high performers than low performers. Tracy, a small, extroverted girl who got into Johns Hopkins, recalled the moment when she contacted her counselor, John, late at night to request last-minute help on her application essay. John was a Chinese counselor in Capital and had about two dozen advisees. As Tracy described the incident in an interview,

"My E.D. (early decision) was Johns Hopkins, and I needed to hand in the main documents. The night before the deadline, I asked a teacher whom I was close to for help, and I revised 60%, basically, all of my essay. Then, and then, in the night, probably the middle of the night, sometime after 10 PM, I called good ol' John. John edited my essay again, and John emailed me and said, 'I think it is almost perfect. I'm gonna kill

you if you revise it again.’ Like that.” She laughed, “What he really meant was, I can’t comment on this, [there’s no] perfect essay. Just stop revising it.”

John usually went to bed around the time Tracy called him. However, John responded and helped her in a timely manner. Tracy felt comfortable scheduling appointments with John frequently and estimated that she met with him “about three or four times per month during application season.” For Tracy and other high-status students, teachers were supportive and tolerant adults who were easy to persuade. These students interacted with teachers with confidence and felt free to do as they pleased even if teachers disagreed. The high performers regularly demonstrated a strong sense of entitlement toward teachers.

By consistently granting favors to high-status students, teachers fostered these students’ entitlement. One reason teachers supported high performers was because student performance determined school prestige. To motivate teachers, top high schools give teachers bonuses depending on their students’ performance, especially the number of student admitted to top universities. Under this system, teachers could choose among a variety of strategies to maximize their reward. For example, they could improve the overall performance of all students by focusing on the low-performers or raising the test scores of middle-range students so that more students could become competitive candidates for top universities. Yet, regardless of these possible strategies, it was clear that high performers must stay as high-performing as possible.<sup>57</sup> This widely acknowledged but unspoken calculation often led to teachers allowing to high performers to do as pleased and a tacit understanding among students that teachers favored those who were likely to attend top universities. By treating students according to their

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<sup>57</sup> When I shadowed Lili two weeks before the *Gaokao*, at least three teachers asked me to provide emotional support by calming her so that she would perform as expected and get into Peking University. I am almost certain that encouraging high performers was one of the reasons teachers allowed me to roam around 12<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms at a time when student anxiety was at its peak level.

test scores, which were the foundation of school status, teachers sustained and validated students' unidimensional status hierarchy. Furthermore, as the key adults who represented adult society, teachers' favoring high performers conveyed the idea that adult society valued test scores above all other characteristics.

### **Low-Status Students and the Relative Lack of Entitlement**

With their annual bonuses heavily influenced by students' college outcomes, some teachers and counselors might have spent more time on high performers rather than equally dividing attention among average performers with little hope of going to top universities. Alex, an average performing student who scored 2150 on the SAT, often had trouble seeing his counselor, Tom, to go through his essay. Alex had reported that Tom told him not to apply for Ivy League institutions "because they were too selective" and "it would be too difficult [for him] to get accepted." Despite that, Alex decided to apply to three of the Ivies because they were his dream schools. When Alex told Tom his decision, Tom asked him to go to another school counselor for advice. During the visit, Alex described the meeting with anger:

"[Tom] said something like, 'Well, I can't help you. You can ask Andrew (another American counselor) to go over your essays for those three universities.'"

Alex had to turn to Andrew for help on those three applications. However, Tom remained Alex's counselor and was in charge of all his other applications. I had lunch with Alex a month after he turned in some twenty college applications. He complained about not getting the attention he deserved from Tom in the past few months.

"The main issue was that I couldn't get hold of Tom."

"Why, what happened?" I asked.

“Like, there was one time I scheduled a meeting with him at 4 PM. I went to his office and waited for him for half an hour. I left a note and then I left. He sent me an email asking why I wasn’t there at five o’ clock. I told him our meeting was at four. He told me to check our emails.” Alex took a deep breath, “Well, it was four. So we had to reschedule. I hate to complain, but Tom is unreliable. Like, getting him to go over my essays. He always said he was busy. Nobody knows what he was busy with, but I had to reschedule our meetings to the following week. If you think about it, it was during application season. With deadlines coming up, you need time to revise essays...[and] I always sent my essays to Tom two or three days in advance so he would have time to look over it before our meeting.”

In this example, Alex was respectful towards his counselor compared to high performers such as Tracy. Despite his effort, Alex did not receive the assistance he perceived as necessary. When I interviewed Tom, he acknowledged outsourcing Alex’s application to colleagues by saying, “I reviewed many of [his application essays]; other staff members read some as well.”

Tom’s refusal to help Alex with his Ivy League applications was unrelated to Tom’s ability. Other students had mentioned that Tom was an important asset because “Tom sent so many students to [the University of Pennsylvania], when lots of other high schools sent none.” The number students reported was so high that Capital alumni would have accounted for over 10% of Chinese freshmen at Penn that year.<sup>58</sup> I often saw Tom meeting with students during my impromptu visits to the counselor’s office over the academic year. When I shadowed Robert, an 11<sup>th</sup> grader who demonstrated high potential by studying for the GRE in the hope of acing the SAT, Tom scheduled four subsequent meetings with Robert to go over his college list and asked

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<sup>58</sup> The total numbers of Chinese freshmen in top American universities are reported by Liuxue (2014).

him to “come up with 10 to 12 ideas by our next meeting.” For other students as well, Tom was an attentive counselor who met with them frequently. The reason why Alex had a different relationship may be multifaceted. For example, Tom lamented that students applied for schools solely based on university rankings, which Alex admitted doing. Another possibility, however, was that Tom, whom others report as having the highest total income among all counselors, chose to heavily invest in students who had better chances of going to Johns Hopkins or Penn and gave relatively less attention to average performers such as Alex.

The privileges teachers granted high-status students occasionally led to mistreatment of low-status students. During fall semester, I observed Mrs. Zhang, a physics teacher, reviewing test questions in Song’s classroom. Mrs. Zhang walked to the right side of the room to check students’ answers. She then went back to the podium and asked Song, a below-average performer, for the answer on the next question.

Song fearfully stood up and answered in a faint voice. Hearing an apparently incorrect answer, a couple students gasped. Joseph, a boy sitting next to me at the far back who was higher-performing than Song, frowned and swore audibly, “What the fuck?”

I immediately looked at Mrs. Zhang when I heard the swear word.

It was clear that Mrs. Zhang heard Joseph, as she glanced at him. However, Mrs. Zhang then looked back at Song as if nothing had happened. Song anxiously tried to explain how she had arrived at her answer, but a boy three seats to her left cut her off by giving his own answer and eventually took over. Mrs. Zhao then checked with Song to determine where the problem had lain. Seemingly embarrassed, Song minced her lips and held her pen tightly as she stood blushing. The episode ended with Song being unable to provide a satisfactory answer and Mrs. Zhao loudly telling her to sit down.



None of the schools I visited permitted swearing. While students, usually boys, occasionally used foul language when talking among themselves, they were careful not to do so in the presence of teachers. A few times, when Mr. Long heard them, he would raise his voice and shout “Hey!” Seeing Mr. Long’s frown, students would immediately apologize and silence each other. Students’ minding their language was an ordinary expectation. However, Mrs. Zhao ignored this incident and permitted Joseph to swear at another student during class. This shows that low-status students are at an inherent disadvantage especially when considering the differential treatment teachers give high-status students.

Students openly recognized that teachers treated them differently according to their school status. The clearest example took place during a daylong observation at Capital. On a sunny day, I joined Jiaqi (an Underachiever) and Mr. Long for lunch in the school cafeteria.

The cafeteria was filled with hundreds of rambling students, the sounds of metal spoons and plastic chopsticks, and pop songs blasted from a TV on a pillar. As soon as we sat down, Jiaqi immediately dug into his bowl of rice. After a couple bites, Jiaqi swallowed a mouthful of food and leaned towards me across the table, asking in a hushed voice, “Have you heard about the incident with Yulang?”

Yulang was the first girl I got to know at Capital. She was a top performer in school and other students often talked about her stellar performance in casual conversations.

Barely able to hear him, Mr. Long and I leaned in to hear the story. “What happened?” “Yulang had an argument with Mr. Luo in history class. Mr. Luo, you know, likes to push his ideas. But Yulang disagreed with him on his view of some historical event. So she slammed her books on the desk and stormed out of the room!” I felt taken aback and asked, “What happened then?” “Nothing!” Jiaqi replied with a tilt in his eyebrow and

rolled his eyes, “The school allowed her to transfer to another history class the next day. Nothing happened.” I turned and asked Mr. Long, “Really? Did you know?” Mr. Long shrugged and responded nonchalantly, “Yeah, I think heard about it. But it’s nothing.” Jiaqi raised his voice. “It might be nothing for her, but the rest of the students like us can’t do that!” He continued furiously, “Think about it. If I did that, what would the school do [to me]? They’re going to figure out a way to punish my disrespect toward teachers. I’m probably not going to be able to transfer to another class. They’d definitely call my parents and ask them to come in to talk about my [problematic] behavior. And then who knows.” Jiaqi frowned, “But the school did nothing to her! They didn’t even call her parents! She just transferred like that!” Mr. Long did not respond, but looked into the air as if trying to distance himself from Jiaqi’s statement. I asked Mr. Long, “Well, doesn’t everybody in school have an opinion?” Mr. Long immediately looked at me as if I had asked something stupid. He said, almost laughing, “Oh, but that’s not the case for her. Miss Yulang would *never* back down from her opinion!” Jiaqi nodded his head in agreement. Not wanting to discuss this further, Mr. Long changed the subject.

One year later, I had the opportunity to ask Yulang what had happened. Yulang, then a math major at THU, claimed that what happened was different from Jiaqi’s account. In her memory, the incident ended with her staying in the classroom and leaving immediately after class had ended. She said that she transferred to another history class because she had a schedule conflict.

While the rumor was more melodramatic than the actual incident, Jiaqi’s fury and Mr. Long’s lukewarm reaction showed that low-status students did not have as high a sense of entitlement as their high-status peers did. Jiaqi used himself as a hypothetical example and

emphasized that low-status students could not be as heavily entitled; thus, he and other low-performing students refrained from misbehaving in school. Simultaneously, by saying that the incident was not noteworthy (“it’s nothing”) and allowing Yulang to be stubborn (“she would never back down”), Mr. Long indirectly confirmed Jiaqi’s perception.<sup>59</sup>

Low-status students refrained from demonstrating entitlement for fear of getting into trouble, but they also rarely had the chance to do so. Teachers often publicly shamed low-status students for their poor academic performance, which reminded them of their low status in school. One example took place at Pinnacle. I joined Fei’s class a month before the exam.

Ms. Gao, the biology teacher, walked into the classroom with a stern look before the start of class. As soon as the bell rang at 7:55am, she glanced around the room and the students quieted down. In this class, Ms. Gao reviewed a test by calling on a student to answer each question. She called on Liang to answer the first question.

“I got it wrong. I chose A.” Liang stood up, but mumbled as he kept his head down.

“Why?” Ms. Gao asked.

“I thought proteins didn’t move.”

“Do you remember what we said about human cells?” Ms. Gao continued, “We used an example. What was it that moved in the example?”

“It was protein.”

“This exposes the loophole in your knowledge.” Liang kept his head down and did not respond. Ms. Gao continued, “If you saw answer A and thought it was correct, did you look at answers B, C, and D?”

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<sup>59</sup> Mr. Long added a prefix to Yulang’s name, calling her “Miss Yulang.” This is the only incident in which I heard a teacher refer to a student in this way. The feeling that Mr. Long gives off by doing so is comparable to a teacher calling a female student “young lady.”

“Not closely,” Liang responded in a hushed voice that I could barely hear.

“Ah, you see.” She turned toward the classroom and then elaborated, “Some of you think looking at other answers is a waste of time. But even when you see the right answer, you have to pay attention to the other answers.”

Ms. Gao looked at the sheet of answers in her hand and called another student in the middle of the classroom. Liang quickly sat down. This student also reported getting the question wrong. Ms. Gao announced to the class, “Only three students got question one wrong, I’m not going to call on every one of them. No one got questions two and three wrong, so we’ll skip those.”

Liang sat still in his seat as Ms. Gao turned her attention to other students. He leaned toward his desk, with his left arm across his chest and his right hand supporting his chin. He did not look at Ms. Gao or the other students called by names. After he sat down, Liang did not move for more than 15 minutes until Ms. Gao almost finished reviewing.

Even though Ms. Gao stated that she was not going to call on every student who got the first question wrong, she had called on two of the three students. It later turned out that every student Ms. Gao called on in that class had gotten an answer wrong. Each had to stand up, explain why they were wrong, and Ms. Gao turned each case into a learning opportunity for the rest of the class.

Discussions over test materials comprised most of exam preparation during 12<sup>th</sup> grade. In these discussions, teachers regularly made public assessments about students’ answers. Judging from my fieldnotes, events similar to this one took place about once every hour. While teachers sometimes focused on lower-performing students for long periods, teachers reported that they intended to help students who needed to improve their test scores. However, by

repeatedly drawing attention to test failures, classroom interactions led to the shaming low performers, thus intensifying the existing status hierarchy in school by holding down students who were not academically stellar.

Not all students showed signs of shame when teachers highlighted their low academic performance in class. One such exception was Xianzu, an Underachiever at Omega. Xianzu texted me one afternoon and asked me to tutor him in English composition for an upcoming test. We met in a cafeteria near his school during his dinner break. The cafeteria was filled with the chatters of Omega students and the shuffling sounds of utensils. I sat across Xiangzu at a table and answered his questions for an hour or so. When it was time to get back to the classroom, Xiangzu sighed and looked at the messy pile of test papers he had laid out on the table. As he slowly organized the test papers, he confessed that he asked me for help because of an incident that had happened earlier that afternoon, when his teacher led a review on compositions.

“My teacher called me up and used me as a negative example.” Xiangzu chuckled, “He said to me, Xiangzu, your first paragraph was acceptable. Your second paragraph went on a wrong direction, like turning back instead of going forward. In the third paragraph, you wildly dashed in the opposite direction!” Quoting his teacher, Xiangzu laughed so hard that he leaned back in his chair. I asked how he felt at the moment. Still laughing, he replied, “It was pretty damn funny! I mean, my teacher was right! The class laughed, and so did I!”

Unlike Song and Liang, who were ashamed when teachers pointed out their mistakes, Xiangzu found the incident amusing. While this incident prompted him to seek help for improvement, the teacher’s comments held Xiangzu at a lower status than his higher

performing peers. Furthermore, Xianzu's light-hearted reaction (laughing along his classmates) might have been due to his acceptance of his status in school—he had cultivated an Underachiever image since the beginning of senior year by frequently hitting the gym despite “barely [having] enough time to study.”

During my fieldwork, I observed only a handful of incidences in which low status students actively asserted entitlement against teachers. Even when they refused to carry out assigned tasks or broke school regulations, unlike their high-status peers who insisted on carrying out their decisions by arguing with teachers, low-status students were careful to avoid conflict with teachers. One conflict-avoidance tactic was to give excuses for misbehavior. Zhuwei, an Underachiever at Capital, provides a successful example. On a lazy afternoon, Zhuwei, Jiaqi, and I were slowly walking up the stairs to their classroom. While Jiaqi was going to class, Zhuwei was supposed to go to PE class in another building. On our way up the stairs, we saw a boy running down the stairs in a hurry. We stood aside to make way for him as he leaped over three steps onto the landing. It turned out the boy was Zhuwei's classmate.

When the boy saw us on the landing, he shot Zhuwei a puzzled look and hurriedly asked, “Aren't you going to class?” Zhuwei waved his hand in the air and responded with a cavalier attitude, “Just tell [the] teacher I'm late because I'm discussing chemistry with other students. He'll be fine with it. You know, teachers!” The boy nodded, “Okay.” He then hurried down the stairs as Zhuwei leisurely walked toward the opposite direction. Zhuwei parted with us at third floor, where he was going to check out something in his locker.

Students typically arrive at PE class within three to five minutes after the bell. However, Zhuwei was probably 10 to 15 minutes late. Common reasons for being late include walking

across campus during break to get snacks or being in line for the girl's restroom. Yet, Zhuwei was simply feeling lazy and wanted to check his locker. Since feeling lazy was not an acceptable reason for being late to class, he knew he needed an excuse to avoid punishment and came up with an academic excuse—that he was “discussing chemistry” with peers. Indeed, the teacher accepted the reason and let go of this incident without further inquiry, and Zhuwei joined PE class smoothly and did not get in trouble.

While Zhuwei avoided conflict with his teacher in this incident, low performers were usually not as lucky. Without an accepted excuse, teachers publicly humiliated the students and forced them to carry out the given instructions. One rare example of an average performer trying to enact entitlement by refusing to carry out a task took place on a warm summer morning at Pinnacle. The 12<sup>th</sup> grade students were called to the sports field to do 15 minutes of calisthenics, where they lined up in rows and performed sets of moves as music the counted their movements in eight beats. Haozuo, a skinny boy with black-rimmed glasses, paced at the back of the group and did not join in.

I walked toward him and asked why he was at the far back. He confidently smiled, “Because I’m special, I do whatever I want.” A teacher soon walked toward him and asked why he didn’t join the others. Haozuo repeated his answer. The teacher, however, was not satisfied and kept probing. Finally, Haozuo responded angrily, “Because I don’t feel well!”

“Why don’t you feel well?” The teacher asked.

Haozuo shook his head and did not answer. The teacher insisted that he get in line and join the others.

Haozuo looked angry, but took a step closer to his classmates. Soon after, another teacher came over and ordered Haozuo to do the exercise. With two teachers demanding him and watching him until he went in line, Haozuo reluctantly moved toward his peers and half-heartedly moved his hands and feet.

After the exercise, I brought up this incident with Fei.

“Oh, him.” Still sweating, Fei took a sip from his water bottle and shrugged, “He’s fine. He’s a transfer student from [another top high school]. He’s probably still not accustomed to our school.” Gulping the rest of his water, Fei returned to his seat and ended our conversation.

Haozuo might have been telling the truth, but the teachers considered “not feeling well” an unacceptable excuse and refused to accommodate him. Initially, Haozuo wanted to demonstrate entitlement by claiming that he “did whatever he wanted.” Yet, the fact that he eventually joined the others showed that he overestimated the degree of entitlement he could demonstrate. Pinnacle and other top-performing high schools accepted transfer students primarily with the expectation that the student would boost the school’s average *gaokao* score. However, among the five transfer cases I know, four (including Haozuo) maladjusted and became low performers. Although transfer students often had high status in their previous schools, most did not have comparable status in the new school. After transferring to Pinnacle, Haozuo became a low-status student who no longer enjoyed similar degrees of privilege. Pinnacle students acknowledged Haozuo’s maladjustment, but were unsympathetic toward his enactment of entitlement (“He’s fine”). In turn, by rebuking his request for a small favor (getting out of group exercise for not feeling well), teachers’ actions held him to his new position in the school hierarchy.



The incident continued a week later, when teachers brought up Hauzuo's behavior in a cohort-wide meeting. Shortly after lunch, I followed students to a cohort meeting in the school auditorium. The head teacher of the 12<sup>th</sup> grade cohort, a middle-aged woman wearing a maroon dress, grasped all students' attention as she named certain students and publicly criticized them for bad behaviors. She yelled through the microphone,

"In the third afternoon class last Wednesday, I saw (a student) walking out the school gate. I asked her where she went. She said she was going back to work. This was PE class, but she dared to say it in a matter-of-fact way!" The teacher glared at the students who became silent at the teacher's rage. "PE class is a regular class. Why are you not going? (Pause) Even during group exercise, when told to squat, a couple of you still stood there looking around!" She shouted through the microphone, "If [these students] can't even do this one simple thing, I don't believe they can do anything for society in the future!"

The teacher was referring to events in the previous weekly exercise, which was Haozuo's initial refusal to join in the group exercise. This example showed that Haozuo first failed to demonstrate entitlement against teachers, and then was criticized for trying to do so. While his offense was minor, the teacher took it so seriously that she doubted his future role in adult society.

Teachers did not always or only favor high status students. Occasionally, they also granted favors to average performers. In these infrequent instances, the student did not show entitlement or take the favors for granted, but were grateful towards teachers. I met Dehong at school on a chilly winter afternoon. Upon seeing me, Dehong quickly led me to the near-empty student study lounge. The moment we sat down across a table, Dehong started summarizing his

performance in school. He said in a low, serious tone, that he worked hard but was never a top performer. He then spent about 30 minutes talking about how he intended to improve his test scores. As I wondered about the purpose of this conversation, Dehong revealed that a teacher who did him a favor had inspired him.

“I really needed to apply for the exemplary behavior extra points. They might be the only extra points I can get. I didn’t have very good grades at first, so I worked really hard to improve my grades. ...I narrowly qualified for the application, but I needed a teacher to vouch for me. I didn’t know who would. I’m not a top student, just ordinary, I barely [made] the cutoff [for this application]. I talked to Mrs. Wu about this a few days ago. She said she’d look into it, the regulations and stuff, but I wasn’t sure. I didn’t know what to think.” He lowered his head and bent his upper body toward the desk, almost at the verge of tears. “But three days later, she told me that she took care of it, so I could apply because she figured everything out for me. I am SO thankful. Really, I never thought she would do this.” Dehong let out a sigh of relief as he slouched against the sofa.

For Dehong, this event was so significant that he became emotional talking about it. This example highlighted the fact that students without high status did not perceive themselves to be the usual recipients of teachers’ favors. While Dehong did not obtain the extra points, he showed gratitude toward his teacher for helping him. By comparison, his high status peers who received the extra points showed entitlement by attributing the extra points to their good grades and failed to mention the role of the teacher’s recommendation in the application process.

## Teacher Reactions to Entitlement

While I observed that teachers allowed high performers' demonstrations of entitlement, they often reported annoyance in these incidents. Mrs. Nie, Shiyong Liu's middle-aged homeroom teacher, commented on Shiyong's attitude toward teachers in our interview:

"I must say I am very disappointed with her. She never came to visit teachers or to say thank you after the *gaokao*. Even other students whom I didn't expect to come, came. But Shiyong didn't, not even after the placements were out for so long. I am quite disappointed."

Mrs. Nie's disappointment was likely partly due to her perceived close relationship with Shiyong. Earlier in the interview, Mrs. Nie was clearly very fond of Shiyong. She indicated that Shiyong was a wonderful student whom she could trust and with whom she could easily communicate. Moreover, Mrs. Nie thought that the school had given Shiyong ample support through heavy investment and offering her leadership opportunities. Shiyong's taken-for-granted attitude, or her strong sense of entitlement, was thus especially upsetting to her teacher.

Yet, not all teachers found student entitlement as annoying. One exception was Mr. Hu, the head math teacher at Pinnacle. I had read in a magazine that Pinnacle students had a reputation of "hanging teachers on the blackboard." Since I did not understand this phrase, I asked Mr. Hu to explain it to me.

Mr. Hu smiled broadly and proudly said, "It means that students are so smart that they will prove you wrong in class. That is what we call hanging teachers on the blackboard." He then let out a sigh, "But that was a very long time ago. Nowadays our students don't do this anymore. I wish they did."

In the first example in this chapter, Dapeng taking over class could be considered “hanging teachers on the blackboard,” an interaction that would have been welcomed by Mr. Hu. However, Mr. Hu might have been an exception because his students were a selected group of top performers. As the homeroom teacher of the top class in Pinnacle, Mr. Hu anticipated over half of his students to go to PKU or THU when the overall acceptance rate in Beijing was about 2%. Mr. Hu also trusted his students with their college placements while other teachers monitored students’ college lists and often demanded changes.

More often, teachers were bitter about high performers’ entitlement. During a daylong observation, I chatted with Mr. Long about Yulang’s likelihood of getting into her dream school after dinner. Yulang had exclusively focused on the Chinese High School Olympiad to the extent that she neglected other subjects. I asked Mr. Long if he thought it was a good strategy.

Mr. Long grunted, “Well, she thinks it’s going to work.” I probed further if he thought it would pay off. Mr. Long sarcastically smiled. “What I think doesn’t matter,” He then said, “The point is, *she* thinks it’s going to work.”

It was clear to me that Mr. Long did not approve of Yulang’s risky strategy. Nonetheless, he and other teachers allowed Yulang to pursue her goal in her own way. Mr. Long was not the only teacher who tolerated Yulang. Mr. Sun, Yulang’s Olympiad coach, similarly expressed tolerance toward her in our interview. When I met Mr. Sun in a conference room, he started the interview by asking why I was interviewing him.

I thanked him and said, “I asked Yulang to identify her closest teacher. She told me to come to you.” Mr. Sun immediately gave a disclaimer, “Hah, I’m not her closest teacher. She feels closer to (another teacher). She asked me because she thinks it’s okay to trouble me.”

He then remarked that because he was Yulang's Olympiad coach, Yulang "knew" that he would say yes to many things she asked for, including participating in an interview with a researcher he had never met.

Mr. Sun did not speak favorably of Yulang, especially her entitled behavior, in the interview. However, he acknowledged that Yulang was a high performer who had a good chance of winning the Olympiad. As this example shows, teachers did not enjoy high-status students' entitlement at school, but nevertheless allowed it by granting favors and fulfilling the student's wishes. In doing so, teachers unintentionally fostered the strong entitlement exhibited by high-status students.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I show that high- and low-status students systematically received differential treatment in school. Teachers fostered entitlement among high performers by allowing them to swear, vandalize, and commit other disruptive behaviors in the classroom. By contrast, low performers could not follow suit and were often reminded of their relatively low test scores. Since status and test scores were inseparable in the unidimensional status hierarchy, teacher-student interactions based on test scores appeared similar to status-based interaction patterns. Moreover, while teachers showed signs of annoyance at high performers' entitlement, they nonetheless continued to interact differently with students depending on their statuses in school. Teachers, as agents of adult society who convey social expectations and strongly shape student experiences, thus became an important external supporter of the students' unidimensional status hierarchy and contributed to students' linking school status and future adult status.

## CHAPTER 6

### BECOMING LITTLE EMPERORS

Although the elite parents in this study generally had minimal involvement at school, they were important adults who played a key role in sustaining the unidimensional status hierarchy students established at school. These parents systematically provided differential treatment to their child at home according to the child's test scores and hence status. High status students developed a strong sense of entitlement against their parents to the point where parents refrained from irritating their child. By comparison, low status students did not have as high levels of entitlement at home and experienced relatively more parental supervision. The high performers thus became the so-called "little emperors" who scholars and media portrayed as entitled, spoiled teenagers who routinely disrespected their parents, while the low performers did not demonstrate similar behavior. Incorporating parent-child dynamics provided a complete portrait of the lives of teenagers.

#### **Entitled Teenagers at Home: An Example**

One night in April, Julie texted me and asked me to meet at earliest convenience. Julie was a top-performing student in Central from an elite family. Her father was a business school professor; her mother withdrew from the labor force when Julie was in 12<sup>th</sup> grade to better take care of her. One indicator of the family's affluence was that Julie's monthly allowance for food and cell phone was equivalent to a worker's monthly wage (about 300USD) in the neighborhood advertisement. Since students rarely asked to meet with such eagerness, I was intrigued and agreed to meet the following night for dinner. We met at a McDonald's half way between her

house and Central. We sat across each other with our burgers and fries, as Julie hurriedly described to me about an incident that happened at her house—her parents had refused to let her buy a particular cup to bring to school. Chinese high schools, including Central, had water dispensers and encouraged students to bring their own water bottles or cups by not offering disposable ones. It was two months before graduation, and Julie accidentally broke hers. “I needed a new one,” she said, “So I looked for one that I liked.” Julie emphasized that she had spent an entire afternoon searching online for a replacement and finally found the perfect one on Amazon. Julie brightened up as she described the cup, saying, “It was an orange cup, not one of those ugly ones, but a pretty one. I mean, the cup looked like mine! It basically had [my name] written all over it!”

I nodded and inquired about the price, she said it was somewhere between 35-45RMB (6-9USD). I had gotten one at Walmart earlier that week, where they sold cups at \$1-2USD per piece. She shrugged, “It’s not that much. How expensive can a cup be? I needed to use one, and that one was perfect for me. I told my parents to get it for me. I told my mom to give me her credit card. But she wouldn’t! They wouldn’t let me get it!” Julie put both of her elbows on the table and leaned forward. She raised her voice, “And they told me to bring a cup from home!”

“Then why don’t you do that?” I asked.

Julie took in a breath dramatically and glared at me angrily. Seeming in disbelief that I did not understand her resentment, she almost yelled, “Did you not hear what I just said?” Pounding the table with her fists, “I told you! The cup was a good one! It’s not like those cups at home! None of them are good, they’re all like those old, white ones, you know? I told [my parents] to get [the one I want] for me, but they wouldn’t! My mom wouldn’t, so I held my

patience and talked to her about it, but she still wouldn't and she told me to ask my dad. I did, but he refused to [buy me the cup]!"

"Why don't you buy it yourself?" I suggested.

Julie frowned and said furiously, "My allowances are for food and phone bills. This was what my dad and I agreed on. This is a matter of principle!"

Julie sunk and leaned against the back of her chair. Still upset, she described that the family incident took place in the middle of the night and ended with her angrily and tearfully slamming her bedroom door in front of her parents. She had texted me when she was in her room.

A few weeks later, I brought up this incident in an interview with Mrs. Jin and asked her what had happened. "Oh, I didn't know she'd call you to whine," Mrs. Jin chuckled. She then described the night, which was similar to what Julie said. However, the mother's point of view was somewhat different from the daughter's. As Mrs. Jin explained:

"We thought the cup was a bit expensive. There was a coupon, but only if you bought two at once. I suggested that there are many new cups at home, they're never used, and she could use those. She said, 'How dare you want me to use those cups!' But actually those cups were perfectly fine. Think about it, if her dad and I are using them, why couldn't she? ... [Julie] felt wronged [and] got really angry. ...[She] instantly turned and went to her room." Mrs. Jin sighed, "Honestly, I don't know if Julie still hates me for that. I'm quite scared of Julie."

The episode ended with Julie purchasing the cup she set her eyes on—one of her parents slipped Mrs. Jin's credit card under the door later that night.



In this example, Julie exercised entitlement against her parents, who provided the resources she enjoyed. When her parents denied her pursuit of distinction (by the cup she used), her furious reaction (slamming the door) signaled her entitlement to distinction and that she deserved a better treatment than what her parents offered. By insisting on distinction and demanding her parents to fulfill her wishes, even in buying a cup, Julie behaved like a stereotypical “little emperor,” which is the generation of spoiled children to whom adults willingly bow and fulfill their wishes (Cameron et al. 2013; Sun 1987).

The little emperor phenomenon, or children be entitled against parents, has received much media and scholastic attention. While some believe that Chinese students are obedient and deferent toward their parents due to the Confucian heritage, studies suggest that such a value system rare among the singletons because the One Child Policy makes these children the focus of attention in the multigenerational family. Many report very high levels of entitlement among singletons regardless. When infuriated, singletons threaten to beat their parents when in old age (Fong 2006, 2007). When faced with job loss after college graduation, singletons refuse to take on available jobs that they perceive as beneath them, but instead relied on parents for financial support even against their parents’ wishes (Bradsher 2013a).

Elite singletons may have particularly strong entitlement at home. With the rapid economic development in China, the new socioeconomic elites in the country often heavily invest in the single child’s education since early ages and prioritize children’s educational success over other family events (Gao 2014; Horwitz 2016; Lai 2012). These parents hire educational consultants that connect high school students to professors in American universities for personalized training, and faculty compensation is up to 2,000 USD per hour.<sup>60</sup> After arriving

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<sup>60</sup> The source of this information is from emails forwarded and shared by faculty in American universities.

at Western countries, elite singletons often demonstrate the freedom of conspicuous consumption and lead extravagant life styles as part of celebrating their educational success (Fan 2016; Levin 2016).

However, not all singletons are equally entitled at home and even elite singletons often do not enjoy royal treatment when the college entrance exam draws near. Studies find that some parents do not tolerate children's emperor-like behaviors and instead focus on children's academic outcomes during adolescence, especially when applying for college (Bin 1996; Liu et al. 2010; Möttus et al. 2008; Zhang et al. 2001). Some teenagers also complain about the high degrees of parental control when preparing for the gaokao (Chen 1994). In the example, Julie was not the average student, but a top student in a top high school in Beijing.<sup>61</sup> Her demonstration of little emperor-like entitlement in 12<sup>th</sup> grade was not simply due to her being a singleton or the family's wealth. Rather, it is possible that being a top performer shaped her degree of entitlement at home.

Changes in parent-child interaction patterns during college preparation reflect the parental focus on test scores and suggest that parents treat children according to their test scores. Because test scores and school status are inseparable in the unidimensional status hierarchy, parent-children interactions based on test scores are indistinguishable from status-based treatments. Parents' response to children's test performances signals to children the significance of test scores in the adult world that parents represent. By extending differential treatments from schools to homes, parents contribute to the adult-constructed environment

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<sup>61</sup> Central boasted that a quarter of the students were admitted to a top 10 university in the U.S. on the school website. Central also states that about half of the graduates went to universities ranked in the top 30s, and 90% are accepted to universities in the top 50s. Central also provided a link to a document that listed the number of student admissions by university's ranking, starting from the University of Chicago, Duke, Brown, Cornell, Rice, and so on.

that sustains students' unidimensional status hierarchy. Consequently, although parents are infrequently involved in children's schooling, they nonetheless play an important external role in supporting the students' status system.

### **The Hidden Role of Parents in Fostering Entitlement**

The commonly reported parenting style in this study resembled what the media refers to as the parents' "slavery" approach, which portrays family life as child-centered and requiring high degrees of sacrifice on the parents (Clark 2008; Xue 2015). When I asked the teenagers how their parents helped with college preparations, they often said, "nothing" or "I can't remember." A few looked at me with a blank expression and thought very hard to come up with an answer, such as "they took care of me" or "they cooked for me." Robert provided a summary of student response. When I asked him how his parents supported or helped him when he was applying for college, Robert patiently explained,

"You see, you probably don't understand, [but] parents can't really do anything for us.

They don't know what's tested, they don't know the materials. They can't help."

The idea that parents were not important in college preparation was common among teachers as well. For example, when I entered the field, I explained to Mr. Long my interest in parental involvement and students' college outcomes, he looked surprised and asked with widened eyes, "Why would parents have anything to do with that?"<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> When I exited the field, Mr. Long reflected on my research and said, "You were right. Parents play a role. Students who have better communication with their parents do better in the *gaokao*." However, this was a general acknowledgement of the association between parental communication and children's *gaokao* scores. Mr. Long did not provide any example for this statement.

developed an overall high level of entitlement and were both oblivious to the amount or existence of parental effort. I asked students how their parents helped them prepare for college. Most of them said

While students thought of parents as providing minimal support during college applications, parents often reported putting in much effort in non-academic support. The elite parents in this study demonstrated four types of assistance for their child. First, they created a college-focused home environment. Second, parents provided emotional support to children in ways they otherwise would not have. Third, parents altered their work schedules and residential locations to care for the child's needs. Fourth, the parents did not take credit in helping the college-preparing children and perceived their conscious efforts to be expected and insignificant.

#### *Creating a College-focused Environment*

Regardless of children's school status or test scores, the elite parents I interviewed in Beijing perceived that helping children focus on schoolwork was crucial for children's college applications. Although Robert thought his parents did nothing to help, his father summarized parents' effort by highlighting his effort in creating a "suitable" family environment:

"The family environment, including living, eating, accommodating, [we] don't let [Robert] get distracted, I mean [we] don't let [him] worry about these specific things. Actually, the help we as parents gave him was just helping a bit on these specific things."

Like Robert's father, many parents focused on constructing an environment for the college applying child. In my home observations, parents intentionally kept the apartment quiet when the child was at home. A typical example was an observation of a father who needed to enter the child's room but tried not to disturb the child at Fei's house:

The father carefully opened the door so it did not creak, took a few steps into the room quietly, smiled at me as he passed by me, fetched something in a drawer in the room, and silently slipped out without uttering a word.

In the four families I visited, parents talked in hushed voices and tiptoed when walking near or into the child's room. The parents expected children to ignore them and the children indeed did so. When Fei's father walked into the room, Fei did not show any signs of acknowledging his father's presence. He did not turn or peek at his father, but simply focused on solving test questions. Even if Fei's father and other parents exaggerated the family atmosphere due to my presence, it showed the ideal environment among the elite families in this study.

Parents also consciously excused children from all household chores during 12<sup>th</sup> grade. While most elite students did not help with family chores, a few reported doing dishes or clearing the dining table for extra allowance in 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> grade. However, none continued to do so by 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Trying to help the child focus on college-preparation, parents often picked up their child after school and carried the child's book bags on the way home. Throughout 15 months of fieldwork, I observed parents waiting outside school gates to pick up their child every day. The parents stood outside of their illegally parked cars that blocked the roads and anxiously waited for their child. A typical parent-child interaction took place at Omega, with a student I call Mawen:

A middle-aged couple parked their black shiny Audi on the side of the road along with other parents. The father stood at the closed door of the driver's seat with one arm rested on the car; the mother got out of the front seat and opened the door to the passenger seat. She stood a few steps in front of the car towards the school gate, stretching her neck at the students walking out. She soon spotted Mawen, a tall boy and

hurriedly walked towards him. Without a word, Mawen shoved his book bag, lunch bag, and two paper bags filled with test papers and books to his mother, who scrambled to catch all of the bags. Walking in front of the mother, Mawen head straight toward the car without slowing down and slammed the car door with a stone face. Seeing this, the father looked annoyed and walked over to the passenger seat. He reached for the door, seemingly wanting to say something to the son, but the mother made a gesture that stopped him. She told him to open the trunk for her and then put the four heavy-looking bags into the trunk. The couple entered the car and drove off.

These examples showed that unlike what children reported, the parents did many things for the exam-takers during 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The parents did not always approve of children's entitlement (such as the father looking annoyed). Yet, they nonetheless allowed children to demonstrate entitlement against them.

#### *Emotional Support*

A second way in which parents supported their 12<sup>th</sup> grade children was by providing high levels of emotional support. Yulang's mother had not agreed to Yulang's plea for having a dog. However, when Yulang suffered an unexpected defeat in the Olympiad, her mother bought her a Maltese puppy within days to comfort her. Parents' emotional support also took the form of elaborate expenditure on purchases that the parents otherwise would not have allowed. For example, Xiangzu's parents allowed him to purchase an expensive membership for a private gym to foster better adjustment in the beginning of 12<sup>th</sup> grade, but not in his earlier years of high school. Parents also promised elaborate celebrations after children completed college applications. Alex went on three ski trips in two months after the college admission deadline;

Robert traveled to Thailand and Taiwan with friends and family after knowing his admission results.

Claire's mother was particularly careful to provide emotional support to the child during college applications. As she expressed in our interview:

"I heard that [children] are in great pressure during application season. ...So I observed [Claire], if she was in a bad mood or something, I'd let her relax a bit, do something she'd be relaxed, or chat with her. Sometimes she's in an especially bad time, when she's working in the night, I would sit behind her in silence to be with her. And sometimes she comes to complain about things, I made sure to listen patiently. Her dad would say, 'it's okay, everything will pass.' Something like that."

Claire's parents consciously supported her applications by listening to her, helping her alleviate anxiety, and comforting her through behavior or verbal expressions. Other parents performed similarly as Claire's parents. Another example was Shiyang's mother. After Shiyang unexpectedly failed to pass the additional test for extra points for THU, the mother consciously deemphasized the significance of this failure. I walked with Mrs. Liu to a parent-teacher meeting one afternoon a few days after the additional test results were publicized. On the way, I asked her if Shiyang was alright.

Mrs. Liu shrugged. She smiled at me and changed to an especially cheerful tone, "I said to her, it's okay. We have other types of extra points. We don't need to have [this type of extra points] anyway. Really, it's okay."

Although Shiyang quickly recovered from the setback, she never talked about it and refrained from mentioning the experience in my subsequent visits. While the mother claimed the defeat was manageable to soothe Shiyang, as I show in the next chapter, Mrs. Liu's level of

parental involvement drastically increased after the test failure, suggesting that she did not take the defeat lightly. These examples showed that parents' emotional support to their children were a part of the conscious effort that parents demonstrated at home.

#### *Parental Schedule and Family Residence*

Parents often made changes in their labor force participation or work hours to take care of the 12<sup>th</sup> grade child. For example, Dehong's father went home early to cook for him; Julie's mother temporarily withdrew from the labor force to care for her. Dehong and Julie might have been thankful to his parents, but neither explicitly acknowledged these changes as parental effort. Rather, both mentioned these changes only when asked about the details of their daily schedule during 12<sup>th</sup> grade. In a daylong observation, I asked Dehong at half past five what he planned to eat for dinner.

"Oh, I don't know." He said as he packed up his black backpack, "I eat dinner at home because my dad cooks for me. His company is close by so he can come home and cook every night." I commented that was nice and asked if his father did that since they moved to the neighborhood. Dehong shook his head, "Nah, it just started this year. He says it's healthier to eat at home."

In our interview, I asked Julie what her parents did. After saying that her father was a professor, she continued,

"My mom is a homemaker. She used to work, but she dropped out of work so she could take care of me this year. She wanted to do that." Julie crossed her legs and looked at me, waiting for the next question.

In both cases, the students responded in a matter-of-fact tone. Dehong first attributed his father's decision to the company's proximity to home; Julie described her mother's decision



to withdraw from the labor force as the mother's personal preference ("she wanted to"). However, the fact that neither parent did so in any period other than 12<sup>th</sup> grade suggested that these decisions were parental efforts to support the child. Dehong's father no longer cooked as soon as Dehong took the *gaokao* and instead stayed at work during office hours. Julie's mother went back to work the year after Julie graduated from high school.

In addition to occupational decisions, Chinese parents often made residential accommodations according to the child's college preparation schedules.<sup>63</sup> As described in previous chapters, many families rented an apartment that was close to school so that the 12<sup>th</sup> grade child could cut down commute times. This was so common that teachers often helped solicit units for interested parents and announced the move-in dates in the parent-teacher meetings for incoming 12<sup>th</sup> grade cohort.

Furthermore, a few fathers moved elsewhere so as not to disturb the child's studies. One example is Shiyong's family. I walked home with Shiyong on the first day after school at 10pm. As I wrote in my field note excerpt:

It was pitch dark. We passed by a few cars with their lights on and some parents waiting for their children, and then we saw someone with two dogs walking towards us. As soon as I saw them, one dog frantically dashed towards us. The dog stopped in front of Shiyong while I froze aside. "Oh, that's my mom!" Shiyong said as she picked up the leash of what looked like an overweight Yorkshire. I greeted Mrs. Liu, I believe she smiled back (I couldn't see her face clearly). Mr. Liu told me in a cheerful tone that her husband had moved to another apartment. She said, "In Mainland China, many men work until very late, so they might as well stay there for a few days. This also makes things more

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<sup>63</sup> Members moving out or the whole family moving to a new location was common practice across social classes (Bradsher 2013b; Larmer 2014).

convenient.” Mrs. Liu then asked if I was tired, while Shiyang made frequent dashes with her dog. Shiyang waited for us at the intersections, but walked back towards us after a few seconds. “Your dad isn’t coming home today!” Mrs. Liu suddenly raised her voice to Shiyang. “Oh.” Shiyang responded. There was no sign of surprise in her tone, but more like plain acknowledgement, as she walked back to us and passed a white lunch bag to her mother to carry for her.

Mrs. Liu’s explanation and Shiyang’s reaction both suggested that the father spending nights away from home was not uncommon. After we arrived at their spacious apartment, Shiyang picked up her cellphone and called her dad. She had no particular emotional expression in the 20-second phone conversation, which consisted of “Hey, dad. ...Yeah, I’m home. ...It’s fine, not really.” Mr. and Mrs. Liu moved to another apartment in Beijing soon after Shiyang took the *gaokao*.

In some extreme cases, the father’s main contribution was to move out of the house, such as Lili’s father. In a hot summer afternoon in May, Lili and I walked to the cafeteria from her classroom. Her grandmother cooked dinner and her grandfather biked to school every evening to deliver her home-cooked dinner.

When I saw her grandfather at the school gate, I jokingly asked Lili if her grandparents, by preparing and delivering her dinner every day, left anything for her parents to do. She smiled mischievously and said that her grandparents moved in because her mom sometimes worked late, and that the family “thought I should eat well and stay healthy.” Her father made way for the grandparents by moving away. She made it clear that this was a temporary arrangement, that her father would move back home and her grandparents back to where they lived after she graduated. I asked why her father had

to move out. “Well, my grans knew how to take care of me better,” Lili explained, “My dad can’t do anything. He’s not helpful. My grans moved in and [my dad] moved out, so he wouldn’t disturb my studies.”

Lili’s father indeed moved out for a short period and the three generational coresidence living situation was temporary. When I conducted a follow-up interview with Lili after she went to Peking University, her grandparents had moved back to their original house in another province. Lili’s example might be an extreme case that showed the norm of parents’ relocation to support children’s college preparation. While her father might not have been helpful to Lili’s college preparation, there was no indication that he held Lili back in her studies. Yet, it was insufficient for the father to play a neutral role. When the father failed to contribute, his main contribution became to move out and make way for the grandparents, who could help, to move in.

#### *Denial of Parental Effort*

Despite these parental practices, parents generally denied their role in helping children prepare for college. Some examples of parents the domestic departments denying their role included the mothers of Kaifeng, Huating, Alex, and Clair. In separate interviews, I asked how they helped or supported their child prepare for college. Kaifeng’s mother answered:

“I, actually, I’m a bad helper [for Kaifeng]. I think I neglected my duty. I’m super busy, and I feel like I neglected my duty. I do a terrible job taking care of my child. I wash his clothes and fix [him] meals, his dad makes breakfast. He bikes to school, [we] get his bike ready with stuff he needs. ...And about exercising, if he needs anything, [we] go with him, pick out stuff for him, and give him good advice.”

Huating’s mother echoed Kaifeng’s mother. She responded to the question by answering,

“I can’t really help [Huating] in every way, especially in terms of school or knowledge, I can’t help. ...I can’t remember anything that I did in the past year. I did a bunch of things for her all day long, I can’t remember, really can’t remember. Because whenever her test were results in, I analyzed her test papers, sometimes I made suggestions, she didn’t listen to me. Like I said, ‘Should we get a tutor?’ She completely ignored me. ...I feel like I did nothing for her.”

Similarly, Alex’s mother felt that they “didn’t help much.” She said in our interview:

“We really didn’t help much. We were worried, so we let him apply for lots of universities. And of course, we looked online for information about universities. We also showed that information to Alex, which university is better in what field, where the university was, how it was like to live there, eat there. We compared these things. ...And we got him external help from friends [and] American teachers for assistance. ...Really, [we did] nothing.”

Claire’s mother was distressed about her humble role in the college application process:

“I really didn’t do much for [Claire]. She mostly did everything herself. ...Helping Claire is something I’m upset about. ...If I helped her a bit more, if I got into my role sooner, helped her sooner, not act like an outsider, because most of the time I just asked about things, but I did nothing for her. This is the truth. ...I really did nothing, I just tried to understand how she felt. And, if she needed anything, she knew I was there. Including her going to Hong Kong to take the SAT, getting tutors, going on trips, I did anything she needed for her. Including gathering information, or when she wrote her application essays, we discussed them, and I gave her advice on her thoughts and topics to write. She did mostly everything herself.”

The parents claimed to “do a terrible job” or “do nothing” and that their children “mostly relied on [themselves].” Ironically, they reported undertaking various actions to support the test-taking child. Parents were responsible for chores from laundry, cooking, to things as detailed as loading the child’s bike every morning, all of which allowed the child to focus on test preparation. The parents also gathered college information, gave advice, discussed essays, sent or accompanied children on SAT trips, searched for tutors. However, while they “did anything [the child] needed,” these myriad of tasks were not acknowledged, but considered as normative. Consequently, parents claimed to have “done nothing.”

While most parents denied putting effort in assisting the child, Tracy’s father was an exception. Rather than consider parental assistance as normative, he counted those activities as effort and often reminded Tracy of his assistance. In our interview, he said:

“As a parent, we might have acquired information on foreign universities earlier than she did. We showed her the things we think are useful and suggest her to take a look. ... I sometimes joked with [Tracy] and say, ‘You might know less than I do about American universities after you submit the applications.’ I tried to consolidate these information, such as which university is special in what way, and there are many opposing opinions online, they are all real situations. I gathered and verified these information.”

Being one of the four fathers who volunteered to participate in the study, Tracy’s father may have been an exceptionally involved father. When conducting interviews with parents, I invited students to introduce me to their primary guardian parent. Among the 18 parents who agreed to be interviewed, only four were fathers. Having interviews primarily with mothers reflected the fact that mothers are usually the main caregiver to their children in China as in elsewhere. Although Tracy’s father was quick to express what they did for Tracy’s schooling,

other reported an overall lack of assistance. In separate interviews, I asked the three other fathers how they helped their child. Julie's father responded that there was no need to help:

"I don't. To me, I think if she wants to do something, she goes and do something. My daughter is very independent. I don't say anything. These days, it's very easy to gather information. She can look for everything she needs."

Similarly, Brandon's father reported that the parents provided minimal assistance:

"Since [Brandon] was young, we never spent much effort on his studies or helped him much."

Xijun's father reported providing minimal help and believed that other parents shared a similar approach.

"We provided things that would make things convenient for her, such as she goes on film schedules, [we] provide the travel funding, and some places and contacts for her. [If] she needs to purchase some small devices, like a video camera, and special apps for computers, we [buy] those for her. ...That's all what we as parents can do for her. ...[Xijun] mostly relies on herself. Those skills, it's all her. This is normal. All Chinese parents think this is normal. [We're] all like this, like nannies."

These parental accounts suggested that children across status groups received similarly high degrees of parental support. Both parents normalized their devotion to the test-taking child ("this is normal") and emphasized that the child was primarily responsible for college preparations. Simultaneously, parents did not acknowledge their role in sharing the exam burden of the child.

In short, elite parents in China typically put much effort in helping their child prepare for college. Parents took care of many daily chores and helped the child prepare for college. Raising

a 12<sup>th</sup> grade child included provisions of elaborate consumption, withdrawal from the labor force, or changing the family's residence. Yet, despite these efforts, the students and their parents in this study typically considered parental input as normal and insignificant.

### **School Status-Based Treatment at Home**

Family focus on college preparation fostered a taken-for-granted attitude among the children. The children consider it normal for parents to take care of everything. In a previous example, Lili described her father as someone who “can’t do anything.” However, Lili was not the average student, but a high performing student in Capital and was increasingly so in 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Her teachers predicted she would attend PKU, which she did. Similar to Julie and Lili, many other top performing students in this study had a strong sense of entitlement against their parents. Huating, a high performer in Pinnacle, shared an incident of her being upset with her parents in the summer after high school. I met Huating in a bustling ice cream store a few days after she received her application outcome. Huating mentioned that she had a tense relationship with her mother after the *gaokao*.

She took a sip of her drink and complained, “[My] mom is an idiot. I thought I shouldn’t be unhappy in 12<sup>th</sup> grade ...but I was even *more* unhappy at home, facing an idiotic mom every day.” She sighed and added, “[She’s] such an idiot.”

I asked her why. Huating elaborated on how her mother messed up her applications and hindered her chances of going to her dream school in Hong Kong.

She stuck her spoon in the ice cream and sit up straight, evidently prepared to tell a long story. “Other than being an accountant, my mom can’t do anything.” Huating said with a frown, “I was going to apply for [universities in] Hong Kong myself. She applied for the

business school without even asking me. She just told me that the business school would have a lower cutoff score. I said [to her], 'Are you crazy?'" Huating raised her voice and angrily continued, "[It was] one day I went home after spending a day outside, I took a nap at 6pm. When I woke up at 8pm, my mom came and told me, 'I did the applications for you.'" Sinking against the back of her chair, Huating said tiredly, "I was too tired to talk about this with an idiot, and she, she just applied for me."

Huating did not tell her mother that her exam score was not high enough to apply for the business school in the targeted university in Hong Kong. Instead, Huating had planned to major in engineering, which had a lower cutoff score and then double major in business. As she continued in our conversation:

"[I] got busted." Huating said tiredly, "So I cried yesterday, I cried so hard. And my mom was especially, at that time, standing aside and trembling. She was crying, I was crying. My sister called her stupid. She walked away. Every time these things happen... I feel that my parents, other than knowing how to make money, [are] useless."<sup>64</sup>

Huating's mother tried to help, but the daughter felt "busted" by the mother's involvement. Huating's opinion of her mother was not a secret, as the mother agreed with the daughter. I interviewed Huating's mother, Mrs. Xue, 10 days after meeting with Huating. As soon as Mrs. Xue greeted me at the front door of her office, she warned me that I might find the interview unhelpful because she "failed as a parent." In our interview, I asked Mrs. Xue to talk about how she took over Huating's Hong Kong application list. Mrs. Xue defended her actions, but willingly took the blame:

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<sup>64</sup> Officially, Huating was a singleton and her "sister" was a cousin. Unofficially, the "sister" was her biological sister that her uncle and aunt adopted because they did not have children. Despite growing up in separate households in Beijing, Huating was close to her sister, who attended a provincial university outside Beijing.



“[Huating] always wanted to study business. She always told me, ‘I don’t know what to study in college, but I’m interested in business. Nothing else matters, [I’m] not interested in anything else.’ So that’s how we did her applications, we focused on what she liked.”

Mrs. Xue tried, but it was not possible to withdraw or change the application. When I asked why she took over Huating’s applications. Mrs. Xue stuttered a little as she recalled the incident.

“When we talked about applications, she kept saying, ‘Say something else. Stop bugging me.’ She wanted to focus on the *gaokao*; she didn’t want to be distracted. So when she blamed me, blamed me, than I, I told her, but this is what parents, this is what parents should do, what parents should do. And as parents, and I, I told you the moment we met that I fail as a parent, why? Because [I] screwed up her application list.” Mrs. Xue sighed, “It’s right for her to blame me. I’m very stupid, like she told you, I’m very stupid.”

In this example, Huating behaved like a stereotypical little emperor. The daughter’s entitlement and the mother’s internalization of the negative remarks on herself coexisted, and one fostered the other. Huating was a singleton and from a wealthy background. However, more important, she was a high performing student in the top performing class in Pinnacle. Huating felt entitled to better treatment from parents, especially her mother. Her parents yielded to her demands and did not “bug” or “distract” her. Most significantly, Huating’s mother showed signs of being afraid of her daughter when faced with Huating’s fury (trembling, standing aside, crying, and walking away). Huating later attended the Chinese University of Hong Kong, but transferred to Oxford in the following year.

Not all students were as entitled against parents. While the high performers made negative remarks on parents and sometimes parents feared them, low performers were on the

receiving end of negative remarks from parents. One example is Wanru, a girl with low status in Capital. I met Wanru at the last month of high school when she hung out with Lili on a daily basis. Wanru was a slightly plump girl with a short ponytail and a cheerful and sarcastically humorous personality. Yet, Lili reported that Wanru had been a slender gymnast who aspired to get additional points by gymnastic excellence the year before I entered the school. Wanru never talked about what had happened, but according to her friends, she suffered a serious hip injury in the second year of high school. Since she had spent most of her time training, she was a low performing student who desperately needed the extra points, which were no longer possible because she could no longer do gymnastics.

On graduation day, Wanru's mother enthusiastically took pictures for Wanru and her friends in the stadium. In this initial meeting with Mrs. Deng, I heard her call Wanru "fat" multiple times to in public. As I wrote in my field note:

I walked around, congratulating and taking pictures with the students I knew. When Wanru and I caught sight each other, she cried out, "Aahhh!" She ran towards me, grabbed my arm, and dragged me towards her mom, a middle-aged woman with neatly permed hair in a black and silver dress. Wanru asked her mother to take a picture of us. We stood still with Wanru at my right. After looking into the screen, her mom put down the camera and said loudly, "Step back, Wanru! Your face is too large!" Hearing her mother, Wanru lowered her head and took a small step back, looking stone-faced. I patted Wanru's shoulder and said that she looked fine. Wanru shook her head and replied in a low voice, "No, my face is too large." As she stepped back emotionlessly, Mrs. Deng agreed loudly, with one hand holding the camera and the other making shoving gestures, "Ai, right, you're too fat!" A few girls came by the mother to take

pictures with Wanru. They awkwardly glanced at the mother and Wanru, and then looked at each other as the mother kept directing Wanru to “Step back a bit so your face looks smaller.” Wanru stepped back a bit more, but her mother kept telling her to move back. Finally, Wanru gave up and move completely to my left, ultimately using my body to block half of hers. By the time we took a picture, the other girls had left. Wanru quickly moved to the opposite side of the stadium and the mother and disappeared into the crowd with her mother.

Compared to Huating, who went to Oxford, Wanru went to a provincial university in northeast China. Unlike Huating’s mother, Wanru’s mother was not the slightest scared of her daughter. While it might have been comparatively acceptable to comment on other people’s body image in China than in the U.S., I had not heard these comments publicly. Other students’ reaction also suggested that they felt uneasy hearing the mother’s remarks on Wanru (awkward glance, look at each other). I observed other parents comment negatively about their children’s body type, such as Shiyang’s mother. However, these parents did so privately and typically sought to draw the child’s attention away from the imperfect body image or weight. Throughout my fieldwork, I did not observe other occasions in which elite parents referred to children as being fat in public, less to say in a volume and manner with hand gestures that would attract other people’s attention. This parent-child interaction between low performer Wanru and her mother was in contrast to that between high performer Huating and her mother.

The different degrees of entitlement between high and low performers are also manifested in the intensity of parental supervision. Shiyang, the Intellectual in Capital, had the free to do as she pleased at home. During the four days I stayed with Shiyang, the mother never examined what was in Shiyang’s book bag. Shiyang was free to make purchases online using her

mother's credit card without supervision. Instead of studying at home, she sometimes sat in the living room and watched an hour of variety shows. Shiyang did not need to report what she did at school to her parents and her parents did not ask about her daily whereabouts. Once, during night study, she spent an hour reading news about a singer on the computer at the back of the classroom. Shiyang's mother allowed her to engage in activities unrelated to *gaokao* preparation and even occasionally joined her in watching TV. Shiyang was entitled to pursuing activities of her choice with limited parental supervision.

By contrast, low performers had different experiences in terms of parental supervision. These students often had restrictions about what activities they could perform and reported detailed schedules to parents. Dehong's parents monitored his choice of activities and were selective about which ones they allowed him to perform. Dehong's mother, a teacher in a prestigious middle school, reported in our interview:

"Yesterday, I found a [Japanese] comic book in his backpack. I said to him, 'What's with this book?' I thought I put the book in the bookshelf for you when I got up this morning. And at night, this book appeared in your backpack. Maybe you needed to take it back home from school, but I'd say, when did you have time to read it?' Dehong told me, 'I read it after I finished studying, did all the homework, and prepared for classes tomorrow.' I said, 'When you've finished studying, preparing for class tomorrow, and finished your homework, don't you have other things to do? But you're reading a comic book. What do you expect to gain from this after you read it?'" She continued, "Maybe as a child, he thinks this is pressure relief. But as a parent, we think, if you do something, it has to be useful [for the *gaokao*]."

When I shadowed Dehong the following semester, he had stopped reading Japanese comic books and instead watched Hollywood movies. Every day during school observations, Dehong quickly finished dinner in the school cafeteria and went back to his classroom to watch a movie for 30 minutes. When time was up, he closed the screen even if the story had not ended. He then quickly took off his headphones, walked to his desk, and studied until the end of night study period. I asked Dehong if his parents knew he was watching movies at school. “Of course,” He answered as if it was natural for his parents to know.

Many would consider comic book reading and Hollywood film watching to be the same—as entertainment with no difference in the purpose of engaging in either. Even for Dehong, spending 30 minutes reading comic books or watching Hollywood movies might have served the same purpose, which was to relax for half-an-hour. However, reading comic books was not useful for the exam, which was why Dehong’s mother opposed this activity. Watching Hollywood movies prepared Dehong for the exam by improving his English listening in the *gaokao* in the guise of entertainment. Unlike Shiyong’s mother who never checked Shiyong’s book bag, Dehong’s mother regularly went through his backpack. Also unlike Shiyong, who did not inform her mother of her details activities, Dehong regularly reported his mother what he did during his 30-minute break. In short, compared to Shiyong, who had superstar status in school, Dehong, who was not at the top of the school hierarchy, was relatively constrained due to higher levels of parental supervision.

Parents also regulated student’s access to the internet depending on the child’s test performance. In a home observation one Sunday afternoon, I sat across the room from Fei and watched as he quietly studied for hours. Fei was a high performer in Pinnacle who received

guaranteed admission to THU. In the middle of the afternoon, at 4:36pm, Fei stretched with a yawn and informed me that he needed to help a neighbor about a test question.

Fei turned on his desktop, put on his yellow headphones, picked up his math test paper and held it to the sunshine that shone through the window beside his desk. A few seconds later, his friend also logged on. While the two discussed questions, Fei opened a webpage to read the news, checked online social networking sites, and texted with his phone. A few minutes later, Fei's father (Mr. Liu) walked in to the room without making a sound. Mr. Liu stood with a straight back behind Fei and looked at what Fei was doing for a few seconds, and then quietly walked out. Mr. Liu then checked on Fei six more times in the next 1.5 hours. Fei could have seen his father from the corner of his eye, but did not close the windows.

At 6:30, Fei was still talking with his friend, texting, and skimming websites. Mr. Liu walked in and was clearly annoyed. He took a few steps towards Fei and furiously yelled, "That's enough! Haven't you talked enough? [You're] talking endlessly! I think you're just chatting!" Fei immediately turned his head towards his father and shot Mr. Liu a nasty look with furrowed eyebrows, twitched nose, and a thrust upper lip that showed his teeth. Mr. Liu stood there and glared at Fei, who kept talking, and then quickly walked away.

Fei's father was upset with his slacking off by surfing the internet and demanded that Fei focus on his studies. Yet, despite the father's rage, Fei persisted in carrying out the activities his parents disapproved. In the end, the parent yielded to the child by walking away. Fei only ended conversation when it was time for dinner. The father attempted to scold Fei for wasting time online over the dinner table. However, Fei rolled his eyes at his father as soon as his father

said, “You were going online...” and dug into his bowl of rice. Seeing Fei’s reaction, the father looked down at the table of dishes and did not finish the sentence. In this example as in others, parental reprimand became a one-sentence complaint that the child ignored.

Although Fei could surf the internet despite his father’s opposition, Xiaolong, a low-performing boy in Capital, was fearful about parents finding out that he was on the internet. At the end of a daylong observation, most students were packing up to go home at around 9:30pm. I saw Xiaolong sitting in a hunched back posture with a lowered head. As I approached him, I realized he was downloading two episodes of Japanese anime (cartoon) on his phone. I sat down beside him and suggested that he watch them at home on his desktop, which would be easier on the eyes and save trouble of waiting to download.

Xiaolong looked up at me and dramatically shook his head as if I had made a stupid suggestion. “No way! What if my mom catches me? She’d be so pissed! Who knows what will happen then? That’s why I have to download everything here at school. I have to secretly do this at school, or else there will be bad consequences.”

While both students went online, Xiaolong did not share the same degree of entitlement with Fei. Fei was not worried about his parents finding out about his non-academic activity; Xiaolong not only tried to hide the fact that he went online, but was worried about the “bad consequences” should his mother find out about him being online. Fei went online for about two hours, but Xiaolong was fearful for going online for 30-40 minutes, which was the average time to watch two episodes of Japanese anime. In fact, Xiaolong could not download what he hoped to. A few seconds later, Xiaolong panicked and was worried that his late arrival at the school gate would prompt his mother to find out what he was doing. He gave up on the second episode and rushed out the classroom with just one episode. Fei and Xiaolong engaged

in the same activities, but the high performer and low performer differed in their degrees of entitlement and expected treatment from parents.

Parents also determined the goods students could access by test scores. Tracy demonstrated her entitlement against parents by insisting that they immediately fulfill her request of cuisine type. On a hot summer day, I joined Tracy and her classmate Tony for lunch. We decided to go off-campus, but had trouble deciding which restaurant to dine. As we stood outside the school gate, Tony named about five restaurants that were Chinese, Korean, or fast food. Trying to make a decision, Tony minced his lips and murmured, “Hmm, let’s see, which one [do I] feel like having...” But before Tony made up his mind, Tracy suddenly tapped our arms and asked, “Hey! Can we get Peking duck at Dadong?” Tony and I looked at each other in awkwardness. The restaurant she suggested was not particularly far, but it was risky for us to get back to school in time. In addition, students typically did not have Dadong for lunch. Dadong was a high-end restaurant where the estimated cost was ten times over the restaurants Tony suggested. Using American restaurants as parallels, the restaurants Tony suggested were comparable to Chipotle, Subway, or Panda Express. By comparison, the one Tracy wanted to go was comparable to Del Frisco's Double Eagle Steak House.

Tony winked and signaled me to reject Tracy’s proposal. I hesitantly said, “Um, I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Tony immediately nodded.

“Why not?” Tracy frowned and raised her voice. “I want to have Peking duck!”

“Are you sure?” Tony asked, slightly timidly.

“Well, yeah!” Tracy replied without hesitation. She then said a third time, “I really want to have Peking duck! Let’s get that!”

“Um, well...” Tony looked at Tracy and then turned to look at me.



Sensing that Tony wanted me chime in and knowing that cost was not an issue for both students, I scrambled for an excuse and suggested there would be too much food for the three of us.

“What are you talking about? There are three of us, that’s just about right for a duck.”

Tracy frowned. She looked at me as if I was talking nonsense.

“Well, um...” Avoiding Tracy’s gaze, he awkwardly asked again, “You sure?”

Seeing that both of us were reluctant to go to Dadong, Tracy pouted and rolled her eyes at us. Without saying another word to us, she took out her phone and called her mother.

In her phone conversation, she said in a demanding tone with short sentences: “Hey, mom? I wanna have Peking duck. Can we have it tonight? ...Why not!? (raises voice) ...Well, go and make the arrangements. That’s it for now. Un.”

After hanging up, Tracy smiled broadly at us and announced that she would have duck with her parents that night. She then agreed to go to one of the restaurants Tony suggested.

In this example, Tracy insisted her mother to fulfill her wishes immediately. Although the mother initially refused (“Why not!?”), Tracy demanded that her mother make the necessary arrangements and topped off the demand with a sentence-final particle (“Un”), which is a nasal sound commonly added to the end of directives. Tracy’s parents gave in and took her to the restaurant. When peers denied her request, Tracy exercised her entitlement in two ways in this incident. She first demonstrated entitlement in freedom of access to elaborate consumption by seeing an expensive restaurant as a suitable place for lunch. Second, she was entitled against her parents by demanding to go to dinner at the restaurant of her choice regardless of her parents’ schedule.

The lower performers, however, did not enjoy the same entitlement to desired goods. Jiaqi, a low performer with low status in school, was a boy who cared highly about the things he

possessed, especially his cell phone. Students could not use cell phones at school. Capital had a policy that, if discovered, teachers would keep the student's phone for 72 hours. Jiaqi's teacher, Mr. Long, kept all the confiscated cell phones in a locked drawer in his desk. One day, Mr. Long pulled out the drawer and showed me the 5-8 phones inside. He said in a slightly amused tone that he was often stuck with a bunch of unclaimed phones each semester because students forgot about their phones at the end of the three-day period, and certainly, none cared enough to argue against him about confiscating their cell phones. None, that is, except for Jiaqi. I observed Jiaqi going into great length to talk Mr. Long out of confiscating his cell phone after being caught using it in the classroom.

However, Jiaqi was unable to hold on to his phone. Around the end of 12<sup>th</sup> grade, a few months before the exam, Jiaqi's mother took his high-end phone because she thought it distracted him from focusing on the exam.

I ran into Jiaqi in an afternoon on the hallway when I was shadowing another student.

Seeing me, Jiaqi walked over to say hi with a pleasant smile. I jokingly asked if he was too busy studying to respond to my messages on wechat (an online messaging system in China). Jiaqi's face dropped upon hearing me mention "wechat."

"I couldn't respond because I didn't see them!" He almost yelled in despair on the hallway. "My mom took away my phone, and she handed me an old crap!" He angrily reached one hand into his pocket to pull out something that might have been his new phone. But he stopped half way and decided to describe the phone instead of fling it in the hallway. "You know, those old phones that won't break even if you dropped them on the ground? Those that you can only call and text, but can't do anything else with!"

I asked what the reasons were.

Jiaqi frowned, "Because she thought I was getting distracted by it! In her mind, I wasn't getting high test scores because I spent too much time using the phone." He smirked in disagreement, "If I were truly distracted by the internet, we have computers in our classrooms, who would she be stopping by taking away a cell phone?" He dropped his shoulder, looking distressed, "But she wouldn't listen. She still took it away and wouldn't give it back to me."

Jiaqi stayed offline until June 8, the last day of the *gaokao*. I joined Jiaqi and his parents in a car ride for a celebration dinner at a Russian restaurant. On our way to the restaurant, Jiaqi received and called his extended family with a rugged-looking silver Nokia that was about his age. The phone did not feature wifi connection, had no camera, and did not have a color screen. It was, as Jiaqi said, only for calls and texts. After we arrived at the restaurant, in the 30 minutes that we waited, Jiaqi asked for his mother's Smartphone, which she handed to him right away. Jiaqi started multiple conversations with his friends and scheduled summer plans with a smile across his face.

Despite his strong resistance, Jiaqi surrendered his beloved phone to his parents. Compared to Tracy and other high performers whose cell-phone use was a non-issue, Jiaqi's experience was clearly different. Dining and cell phone ownership both reflected students' consumption. However, while parents yielded to their high performing children's wishes, from buying a cup or changing personal schedules to take them to a fancy restaurant, the low performing children did not receive identical treatment from parents. The high performers in this study continued to make purchases with little or no parental supervision, but the low performers were careful about whether parents considered their treasured possessions as distractions and warily held on to what parents allowed them to use.

## **Summary**

Despite the small sample, the pattern was clear. While the elite parents in this study were generally devoted to supporting children's schooling, they differed in their behaviors systematically. The parents gave differential treatment to children based on children's test scores by yielding to high-performing children's demands and restricting or rejecting low-performing children's desires. The parents fostered a strong sense of entitlement among the high performers, who often demanded better treatment and were often rude to the parents. The low performers did not enjoy identical treatment, but were instead constantly under parental supervision and avoided upsetting the parents. This chapter, along with the previous chapter, shows that students experienced coherent, status-based treatments by adults at home and at school. As key adults who shape students' everyday experiences, parents played an important role in conveying the high value of test scores.

## CHAPTER 7

### FAILING WITHOUT REALLY FAILING

While parental influence on children's education through status-based treatment is typically confined within the home, occasionally, parents become heavily involved in school during times of "crises," which is when children's test scores decrease and put top university enrollment at risk. The fact that there are often crises in the system points to the importance of contingencies in the unidimensional status hierarchy. In such a hierarchy, the possibility of status mobility depends on the criterion valued. Since students' test scores often change over time, the likelihood of status mobility also becomes possible over time. Moments of crises also offer the opportunity to observe family strategies used to navigate the unidimensional status system. Because parents share students' focus on test scores, parental involvement is a response to child's test scores and aims at improving children's test performances. Parents' ability and actions that interfere and help their child thus directly contribute to both shaping the child's status in the hierarchy and sustaining the hierarchy.

#### **Parental Involvement at Times of Crises: The Swan Analogy**

Imagine a ballet of swans gliding through the water. While the viewer sees them floating with effortless grace, much is going on under water. Being wary of their surroundings, swans are constantly prepared for immediate changes in directions should they spot enemies. Elites are similar to the gliding swans. On the one hand, they are an advantaged group portrayed as the destined winners in status competitions. On the other, in an educational system that rewards test scores, legacy and other class-based achievements do not strengthen the child's

applications. As a result, elites must scan the horizon to guard themselves from downward mobility. Much like the swans, elites are ready to change course at any moment should they encounter formidable barriers in the college preparation process.

Studies on parental involvement show that parents adopt class-based parenting styles (Calarco 2014; Lareau 2011; Lareau and Weininger 2003; McDonough 1997). However, research does not fully demonstrate the flexibility of parental involvement and how parental practices change according to children's schooling situations shifted (see Chin 2000). Many students in this study encountered educational setbacks such as plummeting test scores, unexpectedly failing an important test, or making late decisions about college. In these moments, parents often abruptly changed parenting styles and became heavily involved with children's schooling. The parents no longer relied on the school, but activated their skills and knowledge—or cultural capital—to navigate the college preparation process and help children obtain admission to top universities.<sup>65</sup> Elite parents strategized for backup plans to buffer children from test failures. In some cases, when preemptive efforts were unsuccessful, parents instructed the child to switch tracks by applying for American universities. In many but not all instances, changes in parental involvement seemed to buffer children from academic setbacks and shaped children's college outcomes. Considering that these parental involvements involved high levels of knowledge about the educational systems, English proficiency, skilled communication with teachers, and economic resources, the family's plan Bs were hidden advantages available to the students from wealthy families. By giving children more chances to recuperate from temporary academic failures, elite parents allowed their adolescent child to fail without really failing.

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<sup>65</sup> Elites hold many types of cultural capital. These include cultural capital as high cultural taste and participation, extracurricular participation (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Byun et al. 2012; DiMaggio 1982; Wang et al. 2006), and the knowledge and skills that allow parents to navigate the schooling process (Calarco 2014; Lareau 2011, 2015; Weis et al. 2014). Examples in this chapter focus on the last definition.

In the unidimensional status system based on test scores, test results were greater than a student's individual achievement. Rather, obtaining the highest possible test scores was a group project accomplished by both students and parents. To the extent that school status was connected to future social status (discussed in Chapter 1), parental anxiety in intergenerational status transmission was manifested in parents' heightened levels of involvement. Rather than simply considering elite parents' effort to secure children's admission to top universities as a momentary act of parental involvement, it is better to interpret these parental actions as elite family's attempt and engagement in intergenerational status transmission.

### **Parents' Pursuit of Status Transmission through Educational Success**

As the new socioeconomic elites in China, the parents in this study were acutely aware of the relationship between top university admission and future elite status that research confirmed (Chen 2006; Walder et al. 2000). The parents referred to their own experiences of achieving their current positions through educational success to highlight the importance of college placements. For example, when talking about the fact that her daughter is likely to go to THU, Shiyong's mother attributed her mobility to current socioeconomic position by getting into THU herself:

"I got into a key high school, I was number one in our county, and then I went to Tsinghua University. Although it was difficult back then, I made it through my hard work. I am one of those people who changed our fate with knowledge, and then I came to Beijing. Shiyong is different. Both her parents are intellectuals and she grew up in a good environment. She will be what I [hope] she becomes. I came [from a village] to Beijing

for college. Everyone goes from a small place to a bigger and better one, this is the norm.”

Like most other families in this study, Shiyang’s parents belonged to the new socioeconomic elites in China. The family was related to the military and owned two apartments in Beijing, in addition to having real estates in other provinces. The mother attributed their current socioeconomic status to educational success and expected Shiyang to stay elite, a necessary first step to which was to go to a top university.

Other parents also linked children’s elite status acquisition with going to a top university abroad. When asked about why he chose to send his son to the U.S., Robert’s father made a direct connection between his upward mobility through educational success and Robert’s future status, presumably gained through international education.

“I came from a city in Sichuan province. I was number two in the *gaokao* in my city. I ranked 40-something in the province, [when] Sichuan had a population of a hundred million. From my personal point of view, I don’t think it’ll be easy for anyone to do better than me in the *gaokao*. But I don’t want [Robert] to simply repeat what I had already accomplished. I think, I want him to stand on top of [my] shoulder. I mean, I want him to have a good future, to have more opportunities.”

Like Shiyang’s family, Robert’s family was highly elite in China. The parents were well-educated, earned at least five times over the top 10% income, owned real estates, and lived in a luxurious apartment in Beijing. Comparing himself to his son, the father hoped that Robert would be even more successful (“don’t want him to repeat what I already accomplished”). In the father’s perception, Robert’s higher education was directly consequential to his future status.



Claire's mother also connected socioeconomic status with college education. In our interview, she reasoned that, although Claire could have gotten in to PKU or THU, the parents aimed at pursuing elite status at a global scale.

"[Claire's] father came from a very, very small village in inner Mongolia. He got into college and came to Beijing. [Claire's] goal was to inherit her father's [legacy]. Her father opened a door for her. She would follow her father's footsteps and go from Beijing to the world, to the U.S."

Claire's parents were not only highly educated, had military connections, owned real estate in Beijing, and wealthy. Some signals of the family's financial well-being included Claire's traveling in Western Europe during summer vacation and elaborate gift giving—she gave her boyfriend an apple watch for his birthday in freshmen year. Being elite in China, the mother expressed that they expected Claire to do more than reproduce elite status in China. Instead, they wanted her to obtain top status in global society, the first step to which was attend a top university in the U.S.

In general, parents perceived that college placement had a causal impact on the child's future socioeconomic status. Mingjia's mother summarized the importance of getting into a top university on one's status. In her words,

"[Getting a] top college credential is really a kick starter for a person (one's career). It's very important. You have to fight until you get it."

In the parents' perspective, helping children gain admission to a top university was critical. While other social classes also help children pursue educational success to obtain a better life (Fong 2004; Kipnis 2011), the meaning of top university admission was different. For

the elite parents, top university enrollment was not a matter of educational desire, but of necessity so that children could reproduce elite status.

### **Three Types of Transition to College: Smooth Transitions, Bumpy Pathways, and Unsuccessful Cases**

Throughout the 15 months of fieldwork, I rarely saw parents visiting the school other than for parent-teacher meetings. Yet, whether a parent abided by the norm of having minimal involvement in high school children's schooling was related to how the child transitioned to college. I categorize three types of transitions to college. First is the smooth transition, in which the student entered a top university as expected. Second is the bumpy pathway, through which the high performer experienced an academic setback, such as failing to obtain extra points. Third is the unsuccessful case, which is when the child was not admitted to a top university.

#### *Smooth Transitions*

About half the students who I followed in Pinnacle and Capital experienced a smooth transition to college. In all of these families, the parents adhered to the norm of relying on the school for college preparation throughout 12<sup>th</sup> grade. These parents never visited the school, did not contact the teacher, and were hands-off about their children's education. Some of these students are Fei, Mingjia, Ashley, and Clair. Fei entered THU by landing in the top band of the high school Olympiad. After three home visits, I asked his mother, Mrs. Li, whether and how the parents helped Fei prepare for college. Mrs. Li gave me a sheepish smile and said, "No, I didn't do [much], I just paid the fees."

While most parents denied helping children with college, parents with children who experienced smooth transitions offered the strongest denial. Mingjia was a student who got

extra points from the additional test and who smoothly transitioned to THU. I interviewed her mother at a coffee shop nearby their house. Mrs. Song had just gotten lip augmentation and was wearing a mask that covered the lower half of her face. After she denied helping Mingjia, I asked about the proudest thing she did for her daughter in the past year.

Mrs. Song thought for a moment and repeated the question. “The proudest thing. Let me think, the proudest thing. Hmm.” Evidently thinking hard for an example, Mrs. Song finally said, “The proudest thing I’ve done, is, I think, is that, that I helped [Mingjia] organize her notes. I stapled them together.”

Although the mother stapled notes for her child, this was a low level involvement that took very little time. It was also unclear how the mother’s action benefited Mingjia’s *gaokao* preparation. In fact, Mingjia did not recall her mother doing so in a separate interview.

Ashley was a girl who received multiple admissions from top universities in the U.S. and U.K. In our interview, her mother, Mrs. Fong reported little involvement and even infrequent attendance in the parent-teacher meetings. She said, “If I’m free, I’d go to parent-teacher meetings once in a while. Basically I don’t go.” Claire’s mother had a similar response. While the mother was proud that Claire was admitted to Yale, she gave all the credit to Claire and summarized her parental non-involvement by saying, “I really didn’t do much... [Clair] did mostly everything herself.”

All of the students in this study who had smooth transitions were top performers. Their families were confident about them entering top universities; their teachers and peers predicted their successful university placement; and the students themselves never thought about the possibility of failing. Fei and his parents did not consider attending any Chinese university other than THU. Ashley reported that her hardest time in 12<sup>th</sup> grade was when she had to decide

whether to attend Carnegie Mellon for Oxford. Clair was so high performing that her parents and her considered Brandeis as a safety school. Later, much to the annoyance of her peers who listed Brandeis as their dream school, Claire chose to attend Yale as a full-paying student even though Brandeis offered her full scholarship.

These elite parents, having been college educated and often having spent time abroad, were equipped with the skills, knowledge, and resources to help their children prepare for college. They were able to coach children on test preparation and discuss application essays. With their abundant financial resources, the parents could have been heavily involved in children's applications. However, they did not do so because they did not perceive the need. In other words, parents with children who transitioned smoothly to top universities followed the norm of fully relying on teachers for college preparation.

### *Bumpy Pathways*

While parents who were confident with children's admission outcomes had minimal involvement in school, others experienced unexpected hurdles in the college process. Being aware of the risks in college applications and focusing on test scores, elite parents aggressively and strategically intervened in school when children's test performance declined or when they perceived that children were at risk for top university admission. One example was Shiyang, a top-performer at Capital who had elevated status in school. Shiyang's mother, Mrs. Liu, was a professor in Chinese literature. In the first semester of 12<sup>th</sup> grade, the mother reported minimal involvement. During my four-day stay with the family in the second semester, I observed no conversation over college preparation. Parent-child communication consisted almost entirely of Mrs. Liu's succinct reminders, such as "it's gonna rain tomorrow," "time for bed," or "remember

your lunchbox.” Thinking that Shiyong was destined to go to THU and major in any field, Mrs. Liu followed the default path and deferred to the school about Shiyong’s college preparation.

The turning point was when Shiyong unexpectedly failed the additional test for THU. As soon as Mrs. Liu learned that Shiyong did not do well on the test, she began to coach her daughter in a previously unobserved way. As I wrote in my field note excerpt about the day of the THU additional test:

Mrs. Liu and I waited for Shiyong outside the test location. We took a short walk in the neighborhood, when she stated again that she didn’t coach Shiyong on anything even though she could by virtue of her being a professor in Chinese literature. We joined a group of parents waiting outside the exam building around noon. Shiyong briskly walked towards us in a pink dawn jacket with her ponytail dangling at the back of her head after the test ended. “How was it?” Mrs. Liu hastily asked. “Oh, exams,” Shiyong sighed with a girlish cavalier. Meeting her mother’s eyes, she switched to a more serious tone and said, “I didn’t have time to finish math. Chinese was easier, although some questions were hard to answer.” Seemingly worried, Mrs. Liu, who just told me she never talked to Shiyong about exam details while waiting outside, initiated discussion over the harder Chinese questions.

Conversation in the car continued around the Chinese tested questions for over half-an-hour. Mrs. Liu asked Shiyong what she answered in detail. Being a potential reviewer by virtue of her occupation, Mrs. Liu then gave alternative answers that she thought would have received higher scores. Although Shiyong tried to change topic in the car ride, Mrs. Liu pressed on and made sure Shiyong would be able to give a better answer in a future exam.

Two weeks later, Shiyong texted me that she failed the additional test. She aspired to receive 30 additional points for THU, but instead got none. Although Shiyong had 20 additional points from being an exemplary student, Mrs. Liu felt that Shiyong was at a disadvantage compared to other students who had obtained more extra points. Since then, Mrs. Liu became heavily involved in Shiyong's college preparation. One major change in parental involvement was that Mrs. Liu started contacting Shiyong's teachers to inquire about *gaokao* preparation. About a month after the additional test, I ran into Mrs. Liu on campus as I was heading home from a daylong observation.

I greeted Mrs. Liu and asked what had brought her to school. She said she had just come back from a parent-teacher meeting. She wanted to raise Shiyong's test scores, so she approached Mrs. Nie, Shiyong's homeroom teacher, after the meeting. "It was my first time to go to her!" Mrs. Liu said, looking slightly amused. "I said to her, 'About Shiyong's Chinese composition...'" and then, Mrs. Nie immediately said to me, "I didn't teach her well. I'm sorry." Mrs. Liu laughed, "I wasn't trying to blame her or anything, I was just thinking about what to say!"

To my surprise, I ran into Mrs. Liu on campus again in the same month, when it was an ordinary day with no parent-teacher meetings.

I asked what had brought her to school. She said, "There was a college choice consultation going on. I thought I'd drop by to ask for suggestions. Honestly I didn't know what to ask." She chuckled, "But I thought I should come. So I talked to the Tsinghua admission officer. There weren't many people, it was almost empty. ...The officer suggested that Shiyong should put down a particular major in THU." Mrs. Liu shrugged, "I guess now we'll think about it."

In this example, Mrs. Liu, by virtue of her position as a professor in Chinese literature, could have discussed exam prompts with her daughter on a regular basis. The mother also knew what to do, how to prepare for the exam, and whom to approach concerning Shiyang's performances. Yet, she never coached her daughter, never approached teachers, and never visited school until Shiyang unexpectedly failed the additional test. Shiyang received high marks in the *gaokao* and was admitted to THU as expected. However, the mother's role was not static over time—Mrs. Liu changed and adjusted her parenting style and even showed similar behavior with her American counterparts when the risk of failure loomed large (Lareau and Horvat 1999).

Another example was Yulang. Yulang was interested in physics and had aspired to be placed in the first band of the national high school tournament to enter THU. Yulang's mother, an alumna of THU and editor of a government newspaper, found that Capital offered high quality training in the tournament and transferred Yulang there. However, to the school's and Yulang's great dismay, Yulang did not compete successfully in the tournament. This unexpected defeat led her to take a leave from school for a month. At the same time, Mrs. Liu started calling Yulang's Olympiad coach, Mr. Sun. Mr. Sun did not appreciate Mrs. Liu suddenly initiating frequent communication. In our conversation on campus, Mr. Sun complained that he was frustrated by the process. Initially, he was reluctant to help because he felt that the family was utilitarian. He said something like,

"Yulang (or her mother) was a utilitarian. She only wanted to attend the Olympiad because it guaranteed admission to THU. Now that the policy changed and it no longer guaranteed admission, Yulang wasn't motivated anymore. That's why she lost in the competition."

Yet, Mr. Sun was pressed to help and hence told the mother a little known fact, which was that PKU held a winter camp for unsuccessful Olympiad participants that might grant participants extra points. Mrs. Liu immediately expressed that they would give up THU for PKU. She then requested that Mr. Sun recommend and enroll Yulang for that camp. Yulang did not pass the end-of-camp exam and hence did not gain extra points through participating in the camp. Seeing that her daughter was still without extra points and at serious disadvantage, Mrs. Liu contacted Mr. Sun again. This time, Mr. Sun revealed that THU also held a camp for unsuccessful Olympiad participants a few weeks later. Unsurprisingly, Mrs. Liu demanded that the teacher enroll Yulang in the THU camp as well. To Mr. Sun and the family's relief, Yulang passed the THU end-of-camp test and was accredited 60 extra points. After Yulang received the extra points, Mrs. Liu no longer initiated communication with Mr. Sun and went back to the norm of hands-off parenting.

A comparable example of sudden changes in parental involvement aimed at securing children's admission in the international department was Tracy. Being unable to decide whether to go abroad or stay in China, Tracy had been preparing for the SAT and the *gaokao* simultaneously until the end of 11<sup>th</sup> grade. In our interview, Tracy's father, Mr. Zhou, reported that Tracy's teachers had asked the family to focus on either Chinese or American universities because "preparing for both just wouldn't work." However, since Tracy was top-performing, Mr. Zhou ignored the suggestion. The parents did not contact teachers and did not visit despite teachers' request to meet. In my interview with Tracy in her senior year, she recalled the turning point that made her decide to go abroad to be when she got an unsatisfactory test score in Chinese at the end of 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Her parents sensed that Tracy's relatively late decision put her at a disadvantage against her foreign-bound peers who had been preparing for American



universities since entering high school. As a result, the parents immediately increased their levels of involvement.

Mr. Zhou first drew on his occupational skills as a researcher to gather information about American universities. He looked for information online, talked to counselors in school, he asked his friends who had sent children abroad. He sent Tracy to private institutions that specialized in preparing students to American institutions. On top of that, he estimated the cost of sending Tracy abroad, which he calculated to be at least 60k USD per year, as opposed to 2,000USD per year if she went to a university in China. Learning that the application list was of great importance, her father focused on strategizing for Tracy's college choice.

When he started, Mr. Zhou did not know anything about the American system, he was even confused why people recommended private universities over public ones. But he acquired much information over the course of research. He examined and compared the chances of desirable employment upon graduation from different universities, the rankings, SAT scores, and other admission information for dozens of American universities. In addition, he checked the crime rates in each area and decided there were only a handful of universities to consider because, as he said with an apologetic smile, "Most good schools are in dangerous neighborhoods, including Chicago, Yale, and Penn." Yet, by the end of 12<sup>th</sup> grade, Mr. Zhou had memorized U.S. university rankings to strategize for Tracy's college choices. He followed counselors' suggestion in applying for "reach, fit, and safety schools." Mr. Zhou finalized Tracy's college application list after Tracy got a 2200 SAT score. He talked about his strategy:

"A top-30 university is good. A top 50-60 university is really not worth going. My daughter will surely get in to a university ranked in the top 30. In fact, I let Tracy apply

mostly to universities in the top 20. But to be safe, we listed a university [ranked] in the 60s as a backup.”

Later, Mr. and Mrs. Zhou resumed relying on the school for college preparation. Her parents did not visit the school, did not approach teachers, nor did they interfere even when Tracy had a nervous attack over her application essay. After she described that night, I asked Tracy what her parents were doing. She looked at me, surprised that I even asked that question. She then shrugged and guessed, “They were probably sleeping in [their] room.”

Tracy’s description suggests that although Mr. and Mrs. Zhou were heavily involved in the process at one moment, they did so only as contingency planning and were involved in Tracy’s college applications only when they perceived necessary. Tracy was admitted to Johns Hopkins University, a result her parents considered satisfactory.

While Shiyang, Yulang, and Tracy each had an event that led their parents to change involvement patterns, other students had continuous events that prompted parents to switch between various degrees of supervision and school involvement. One example is Jiaqi. When I first met him in the fall of 11<sup>th</sup> grade, Jiaqi estimated that he would likely score 640 out of 750 in the *gaokao*, which was about 10 points below the cutoff score for PKU/THU and was hopeful for getting in to PKU or THU. I interviewed his mother in the start of spring semester. Mrs. Xu reported that Jiaqi had been suffering from anxiety that made him physically ill before tests. As Mrs. Xu described,

“In the past two years or so, every time it’s near a test, he gets sick. He gets a fever and has a swollen throat. Of course, it’s not terribly serious, but it’s very uncomfortable.”

When Jiaqi’s test scores started to deteriorate, his parents attributed his test performances to the increasingly uncomfortable anxiety symptoms. Mrs. Xu reported that they ensured Jiaqi felt

minimum pressure at home, such as not talking about tests or reminding Jiaqi that as long as he tried his best, test scores were “no big deal.”

However, Jiaqi’s performance worsened. I asked Jiaqi how he did in a mock exam at the end of 11<sup>th</sup> grade. He proudly reported, with narrowed eyes and pointing his chin upwards, “Super good! I got over 620! And it’s because our teachers were too strict on our essays!” Yet, despite Jiaqi’s positive attitude, his parents were not content with his test scores and they no longer adopted the minimal pressure approach. When I asked Mrs. Xu about Jiaqi’s symptoms near the end of 11<sup>th</sup> grade, she seemed upset and said:

“I say, he wasn’t hard working enough, that’s why he got nervous every time before a test. He’s better now, I think he let it go (*kan kai le*). I think he really didn’t care that much about [test scores] anymore. He’d come back and tell me about the superstars in school. They’re very, very outstanding. So I asked, ‘Don’t you want to be like them?’ He said ‘Nah, [I’m] not nearly as good as them, why would I want to work so hard anyway.’”

He set a lower goal for himself [and] told himself that ‘I don’t need to be that good.’”

Although Jiaqi might have “let it go,” his parents did not. Seeing that he was no longer anxious about tests, the parents increased their levels of supervision toward the end of 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Jiaqi complained to me that his parents coached him over *gaokao* materials, constantly asked or scolded him about his low test scores, and wanted to get him a private tutor so he will “have absolutely no spare time and do nothing but study every single minute.” At the meantime, Mrs. Xu started to express her anxiety over Jiaqi’s test scores more publicly. After a home observation, as the family walked me out the apartment, we ran into a neighbor at the elevator.

The middle-aged neighbor women immediately asked, “How are you guys doing for the *gaokao*?” Mrs. Xu replied worriedly, “Ugh, no idea.” From the corner of my eyes, I saw Mr. Xu swiftly walk away, seemingly hoping to be excluded from this conversation.

“It should be no problem, you don’t have to worry about Jiaqi at all!” The women encouraged Mrs. Xu in a high-pitched voice, “He’s in Capital, and it’s such a good school!”

“Hah,” Mrs. Xu sneered, “We *totally* need to be worried!”

Jiaqi looked at me with pouted lips and turned his head the other way. Mr. Xu did not look back.

Jiaqi’s test scores steadily plummeted despite increased parental supervision. By the spring semester of 12<sup>th</sup> grade, Jiaqi’s parents closely monitored his daily activities and took away his cell phone. Seeing that even the most intense parental supervision failed to improve his performance, Mrs. Xu began looking into alternative pathways in preparation for an expected exam failure. Just two month before the *gaokao*, Mrs. Xu found an agency that sent students with relatively low scores to French universities. Since the parents felt that “a [non-top] university in China is really not worth attending,” they immediately enrolled Jiaqi in the program.

In a casual conversation over lunch, Jiaqi’s mother told me that Jiaqi did not expect to go abroad and was in tears when he heard about the decision. However, Jiaqi seemed to have adjusted well when I saw him in school a month later. Jiaqi received a self-reported “hideously low score” in the *gaokao*, a result anticipated by his parents. With their planned alternative route, Jiaqi turned down his second choice (a non -top university) and attended the Université de Technologie de Compiègne with an estimated expense of \$12,000 each year. Mrs. Xu

expressed multiple times that she pictured Jiaqi staying abroad for graduate school and considered the decision of going to France as moving in the right direction.

In this example, Jiaqi's parents adjusted strategies multiple times according to Jiaqi's performance. While Jiaqi's performance was below average in Capital, his *gaokao* score allowed him to enter a top-tier university ranked in the top 40 in China. However, since top university enrollment was the only acceptable outcome for the family, the parents quickly withdrew from the Chinese educational system. In the case as in others, when exam failure seemed to jeopardize children's chances of status reproduction, elite parents refused to move down the status hierarchy. Instead, they decided to go to other countries and reproduce elite status at a global scale.

Jiaqi was not alone in switching tracks. Parents also directed children to switch tracks if the child unexpectedly failed the *gaokao*. One such example was Huating. Being a high performer, Huating decided on her application list alone and did not discuss with neither her parents nor her teacher. However, after she scored a few points below the cut-off score for PKU, Huating and her parents decided that her initial second choice was beneath her and she immediately applied for universities in Hong Kong. This time, instead of letting Huating decide on her Hong Kong applications, Mrs. Xue took over and filled out the applications. Yet, Mrs. Xue focused on business schools, which was Huating's primary interest, and neglected that admission cutoff scores for business schools were as high as PKU. As a result, Huating did not get in to the family's top choice in HK, but was admitted to an engineering school in a school comparable to the Chinese University of Hong Kong. When I visited Huating in Hong Kong one month into her freshman year, she told me she was preparing to transfer to the University of Oxford. Perceiving universities in Hong Kong as having unsatisfactory global status, her parents

instructed and fully supported her to pursue this route. Five months later, Huating texted me and announced that she would enroll in Oxford starting in her sophomore year. In our text exchanges, she said that her parents were overwhelmed with joy by her achievement and the additional year in college and expenses associated with this decision (annual cost of \$56,000) was not a concern considering the prestige.

In short, the elite Chinese parents in this study only began to instruct children when test failure put top university admission at risk. In these instances, parents drew on multiple resources obtained by their socioeconomic elite positions. They utilized occupation-based knowledge to coach children, drew on personal networks to obtain college-related information, and used their economic resources to pursue international higher education as backup plans. These parents, like the swans in the analogy, immediately switched trajectories at critical moments—when top university admission was uncertain and hence status reproduction was at risk. Furthermore, their involvement highlighted the significance of test scores and parental input in buffering children from mobility in a unidimensional status system.

#### *Unsuccessful Cases*

Despite parents' involvement, not all students entered their dream schools. In particular, even the most class-based parental involvement was insufficient to compensate for a child's low exam score. One of the few cases is Luohau, a poor performing student whom I did not know personally. I overheard Luohau's father, a mathematician, talk to other parents about making up a college list for his son. The father complained loudly:

"I did three months of statistics for my son and slept at 1 or 2 [am] every day for three months. I took out all of [my son's] test scores in high school, put them in front of me on my desk, and calculated his possible score in the college entrance exam. His test scores

fluctuated a lot, so I needed to know the standard deviations to determine his possible exam score and where he might end up.”

I later learned that Luohau received a low score in the *gaokao*. He failed to get into his top choice and landed at a provincial university outside of Beijing. Although Mr. Deng heavily strategized and was involved to the point of being sleep deprived, his son was not admitted to any top university due to unsatisfactory performance in the *gaokao*. This case illustrates that features of the institutional context could limit the benefits accrued by parents’ involvement, such as parental involvement could not compensate a low test score in an exam system.

In other instances, the lack of involvement seemed to carry consequences. While almost all elite parents switched parenting styles when high-performing children’s test scores dwindled, Jianmin Wu’s parents did not do so. Jianmin was a high-performing boy in Pinnacle who was confident about being admitted to PKU. Jianmin is an outlier in this sample, as he comes from a cross-class marriage: his father was a high school graduate worker; his mother was a literature magazine editor who dropped out of college. Jianmin’s family income was less than the top 10% in China, but his family owned assets in Beijing. Another reason that I kept Jianmin in the sample was because mothers were typically the main care givers. Having been college educated, Mrs. Wu was able to help Jianmin in the college application process. Finally, from a multigenerational perspective, Jianmin had elite grandparents who were college graduates who could compensate for his father’s relatively low education (Jaeger 2012; Zeng and Xie 2014). Jianmin reported taking the lead in his education, which his mother affirmed in our interview:

“Really, I’m quite at ease about Jianmin. I’ve never told him to pay more attention in class, get work done, or stop playing, or like that. He took care of things himself.”

Like Shiyang, Jianmin unexpectedly failed the additional test for PKU. However, unlike Shiyang's mother, Jianmin's mother did not perceive the risk of failure. She did not visit the school, did not coach Jianmin, and did not visit the school to ask about Jianmin's college choices. Jianmin performed poorly in the exam. His exam score was not high enough to enroll in PKU, nor was it enough for his second choice. His third choice did not allow students to list it as third, and his last two choices had raised the cutoff scores too high. Underperforming and with poorly-made college choices, Jianmin was without university placement despite scoring in the 93% in Beijing. Jianmin's family scrambled to apply for universities in Hong Kong. However, Jianmin's mother continued to adopt a hands-off approach and let Jianmin prepare for HK universities alone. Jianmin did not get into any university in Hong Kong. Instead, he landed in a provincial-level university outside of Mainland China, and one that he had previously not considered.

When talking about Jianmin's college results, Mrs. Wu regretted her lack of involvement:

"If, I think, if [I] had done my homework, if I had been a bit more diligent, I could've figured out if some schools took students who set them as later choices. It's entirely possible that his third choice didn't accept being placed as third. [But] I wasn't too mindful of that information. Now all of this has passed, but I didn't do my job."

Jianmin's mother had gone through the application process and had attended college.

As Mrs. Wu herself indicated in the interview, she considered herself capable to help Jianmin by reading the application guidelines, strategizing over college choices, or talking to teachers. Yet, she allowed her familiarity and knowledge of the system to remain unutilized. I visited Jianmin two months after college started. He reported having lost touch with almost all of his high school classmates, half of whom attended PKU or THU. Before I bid farewell to him at the bus station, Jianmin said sadly, "I've left home, so my neighbors and friends and family can't point



fingers [at me]. But my parents probably had to explain to everyone else why their son went to Pinnacle but failed to get into a top university.”

### **Summary**

The parents in this study perceived university placement as a precursor of future elite status and are highly attentive to children’s test scores, which both defines students’ college outcomes and status hierarchy. By choosing whether and when to become involved depending on children’s test scores, parental involvement conveys a clear message to students that test scores are highly important among the adults. Significantly, the existence of crises in decreased test scores represents the possibility of mobility in the unidimensional status hierarchy. Parental strategies in the college transition process in turn become strategies for navigating a unidimensional system that solely emphasizes test scores. Since parental behaviors aim at improving children’s test scores, parents not only validate the significance of the unidimensional status hierarchy, but also directly contribute to children’s status in school.

## CONCLUSION

Adolescents sort each other into different groups in high school and accord higher status to some students over others. Examining student status hierarchies in the U.S., scholars have categorized and labeled many types of student status groups. Research shows that student status groups range from general categories such as “jocks” versus “burnouts” (Eckert 1989) to detailed hierarchical rankings such as “cool kids,” “geeks,” and “nerds” (Milner 2015). In particular, elite students in Western societies employ cultural markers to determine each other’s school status.<sup>66</sup> These markers include a variety of student behavior in school, including school activities in which one participates, demonstrations of ease in all circumstances, or tastes that students demonstrate through purchased commodities (Cookson and Persell 1985; Courtois 2013; Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009; Khan 2011; Maxwell and Aggleton 2010). For example, elite teenagers distinguished between peers who “get it” versus others who do not (Khan 2011) and marked distinction among many status groups, such as the “popular” kids, “senior second tier,” “third-tier guys,” “freaks,” and others (Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009).

The findings primarily among American teenagers (with a few studies examining non-American adolescents)<sup>67</sup> shed light on the hierarchical nature of student status groups and the centrality of hierarchy in student interactions that can be applied to other contexts (Milner

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<sup>66</sup> These cultural markers are often considered as cultural capital. Definitions of capital are often contested. Scholars commonly operationalize cultural capital as high cultural participation (such as DiMaggio 1982; Wang et al. 2006). However, as Bourdieu (1986) argues, cultural capital takes on various forms and is not limited to one specific type. Lareau and colleagues also demonstrate the fruitfulness of considering multiple types of cultural capital in education research (Lamont and Lareau 1988; Lareau 2015; Lareau and Weininger 2003).

<sup>67</sup> Courtois (2013) observed Irish teenagers. Maxwell and Aggleton (2010) examine examples of British teenagers. Mijs and Paulle (2016) study Dutch adolescents. Milner (2013) compares teens in the U.S. and India.

2013). Yet, these studies often portray student status hierarchies as a multidimensional system and underemphasize the fact that students often navigate status hierarchies according to the features of the system. In multidimensional hierarchies, students can achieve high status through various coexisting channels (Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009). The students focus on excluding peers who do not belong in the same groups and are cautious about status motility through social associations (Eckert 1989; Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009; Milner 2015; Weis et al. 2014). High status students are especially motivated to maintain the existing hierarchy, often by initiating changes in consumption or the valuable criteria in status, so that low status students cannot catch up (Eder 1985; Milner 2015). The adolescent status hierarchies also reward characteristics distinct from those rewarded in the adult social world (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Arum and Roksa 2011; Coleman 1961; Eder 1985; Foley 1990). As a result, adolescents are not ingenerated into adult society, and adolescent society is disconnected with real, adult society.

In this study, I have challenged the dominant perception that views adolescent status hierarchies as multidimensional with a well-established unidimensional status system among Chinese high school students. I showed that students established a unidimensional status hierarchy based on test scores, which were at the center of attention for students, parents, teachers, and the general Chinese public. The hierarchy I observed had a clear structure with four distinct status groups: Intellectuals (*Xueshen*), Studyholics (*Xueba*), Underachievers (*Xuezha*), and Losers (*Xueruo*). Status distinctions were common practice to the point that the terminologies became slangs in everyday conversation. Because the only criterion that counted toward status was tests scores (from practice tests given in classrooms to prepare for the real exam), social associations did not make any difference to status, and students befriended others

across status groups. In these relationships, each student remained in their status groups and continued to receive differential treatment by peers based on each other's respective status. All members, regardless of their status, justified the system using an identical explanation and attributed status differences to variations in innate ability. The hierarchy also strongly shaped student interactions at school and at home. High status students received benefits from teachers and parents, while low status students did not. The adults played an important role in sustaining the hierarchy even without explicitly acknowledging the status groups among students. Because parents and teachers gave differential treatment to students depending on their test scores, school status was closely connected to adult society.

By showing how elite students establish, maintain, and legitimize a unidimensional status system, my findings expand the sociological understanding of adolescent status systems based on observed features of multidimensional hierarchies. The students in this study developed strategies to navigate the well-established unidimensional status hierarchy in ways that were dissimilar to the patterns scholars commonly find in a multidimensional one. This study underscores the need to improve conceptual models of the nature of status hierarchies and the factors that facilitate the allocation of people into status hierarchies. Examining the dynamics between status groups and the external agents that facilitate and support such a unidimensional status hierarchy remains important for future sociological research.

### **Other Types of Unidimensional Status Systems**

While I use the example of socioeconomic elite Chinese adolescents, unidimensional status hierarchies exist in many social groups. Two examples of having unidimensional status hierarchies include professional athletes and the military. I suspect that, in professional sports,

an athlete's status depends on their athletic prowess/abilities. For instance, LeBron James is regarded as a superior/elite basketball player because he is consistently one of the NBA's top scorers in a season. In comparison, Jae Crowder does not score as many points in a game/season, and thus has a lower status compared to James. There is a well-established hierarchy for ranking military personnel. In the U.S., Gustave Perna is a four-star general and has higher status than Michael Flynn, who is a three-star general. The generals' cultural taste or appearances do not influence their rankings.

In both the military and the NBA, all members participated in and supported the system. The low status players sustain the hierarchy by seeking to improve their scores and did not advocate for alternative status criterion. Similarly, the low status military personnel seek to increase their ranks without altering the structure of the hierarchy. The non-athletes often treated the athletes according to their status in the NBA. The public pays more attention to top players than the low status players. For example, a Google news search shows that there are approximately 2,010,000 news reports related to LeBron James, while Jae Crowder has about 3% of James' hits. Military rank leads to non-military benefits; the income of four-star generals is about 30-40% greater than that of three-star generals.

The examples provided are simplified analysis. However, the score-based hierarchy among professional athletes and the rank-based hierarchy among military personnel are unidimensional status hierarchies that share commonalities with the test score-based hierarchy observed in this study. Since members commonly value one criterion above other individual characteristics, social associations do not threaten the hierarchy. Hence whom one is friends with or whom one marries becomes less important. Even if one's social associations may benefit

one's training or service opportunities, one's status remains determined by their scores and ranks.

The unidimensional status hierarchy is sustained by those with top status, but also by members with low status. Oftentimes, even outsiders who are not part of the hierarchy support it, such as fans choosing to support successful players and the government rewarding military status with monetary benefits. In short, while I examine one unidimensional status hierarchy in detail, the conceptual implications found are applicable to other status hierarchies that share a similar structure.

### **The Meaning of Status Criterion in the Unidimensional Status Systems**

Without competing criteria in the status hierarchy, the rewarded status criterion in a well-established unidimensional status hierarchy carries significant meaning for members in the status system. To the extent that these meanings are infrequently observed in multidimensional status hierarchies, examining unidimensional status hierarchies will further our understanding of how status hierarchies fundamentally shape peoples' daily interactions and their perceptions of inequality. In this section, I draw on examples of the students in this study to illustrate the power of the rewarded status criterion. I then use the example of the unidimensional status hierarchy in the athletic world (e.g. Michael Phelps) as a parallel illustration.

First, the valued criterion in a unidimensional status hierarchy powerfully shapes members' life in general. While the school hierarchy defined status between students in school, it further affected teacher-student interactions at school and parent-child interactions at home. Only the selected top performers could defy teachers, while others must follow the teachers' instructions and carry out the teachers' commands. Similarly, only a few top students could be

rude and entitled against their parents, while others must obey parental demands and are under closer supervision. High status students gained a powerful sense of entitlement at school and at home through consistent interaction patterns with people who they contact in everyday life. By comparison, the low status students learned to accept and anticipate different, less forgiving treatment from others in their immediate network. Through these systematically different interactions in daily life, test scores became significant beyond the school context. This suggests the possibility that the status criterion could carry value beyond the context in which the hierarchy emerged.

Second, the rewarded status criterion in a unidimensional status hierarchy signals each member's ability and value to others in the hierarchy. While the valued criterion is one individual characteristic, members in the hierarchy may assign such a high value to the criterion that it becomes a general estimation of a member's worth. Each of the students in this study was differently talented. Jina was a model, Brandon was athletic, and Joe was a musician. However, these talents went unaccounted for status their peers. The students extrapolated the role of test scores, which was a measure of students' academic performance, and used it as a general evaluation of each other's overall ability. Test scores took on meaning that far exceeded what it measured. In other words, the one and only criterion in a unidimensional status hierarchy has the potential to become all-encompassing to point that it may override all other individual characteristics.

Third, members' focused attention on the possession of the valued status criterion generates support of the unidimensional status hierarchy. In this study, test scores were at the center of student attention and peer competition. By focusing on each other's test performance, students were inattentive to inequalities embedded within the system. The elite students in this

study had highly educated parents who had top income in the country. However, the students believed that possessing high test scores depended on individual ability and they neglected advantages in class-based resources and family background, both of which scholars have shown contribute to academic performance (Ye 2015; Yeung 2013). Focused on each other's relative possession of the status criterion, members do not see each other's position in the hierarchy as signals of inequality. Rather, they see the hierarchy as reflective of individual merit and lend support to the status system.

These attributes of the status criterion in a unidimensional status system may be observed among other similar status systems. An example that parallels these findings is Michael Phelps. As a highly accomplished Olympic swimmer, Michael Phelps' status shaped his daily life. He was invited to speak to children and major companies offered him endorsement contracts. His top athlete status also shaped the ways others interacted with or talked about him. In many instances reported by the media, swimmers as well as non-athletes showered praise and adoration on his accomplishments. Being a swimmer, Michael Phelps' achieving top status in swimming should not imply that he has high ability in all other criteria. However, the fact that photos of him inhaling from a marijuana pipe surfaced in tabloids and he was caught for DUI twice became scandal suggested that the top athlete was presumed to be superior in non-athletic spheres, such as morality and substance use. Finally, while Michael Phelps may be particularly talented in swimming, his mother had sent him to swimming lessons and he began training seriously at a young age. However, when discussing his achievement, scholars might focus his training alongside his peers (see Chambliss 1989) but neglect that family background had played an undeniable role in his athletic career.



The examples of Chinese high school students and an Olympic swimmer suggest that unidimensional status hierarchies potentially share common attributes regardless of the social groups that constructed them. Specifically, the significance of status criterion in unidimensional hierarchies may differ from that of the status criteria in multidimensional hierarchies. As I have shown, whether test scores or swim time, the rewarded criterion in unidimensional hierarchies likely acquires meanings beyond the context in which members constructed the hierarchy.

### **What Shapes Student Life?**

My findings carry practical implications for sociology of education. Scholars should pay greater attention to how academic performance, whether test scores or grades, shape student experiences at school and at home. Literature rarely discusses the role of academic performance or test scores in student status groups.<sup>68</sup> Research on elite students emphasize the cultural-basis of status (Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009; Khan 2011) and studies on high school students in general often argue that students deemphasize the importance of grades or test scores (Foley 1990). Yet, the emphasis of cultural capital among American students may be the result of an educational system that consciously rewards multiple talents. Scholars who touch upon the significance of academic performance focus on the negative emotional consequence brought out by heightened academic competition (Demerath 2009) or stigmatization associated with Asian-American educational achievement (Jiménez and Horowitz 2013). Partly because academic performance is typically a side topic or analyzed as source of pressure in student life,

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<sup>68</sup> Scholars show that this pattern continues into college, where students continue to negatively perceive peers who focus on grades and minimize their time and energy spent on academic work (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Arum and Roksa 2011).

studies construct the perception that academic performance either do not matter for students or is a negative impacts high school life.

However, the examples of Chinese students show that, at least in certain circumstances, students in test-based systems are willing to work very hard and fully devote themselves to exam preparation. In fact, preparing for an exam and obtaining high test scores can become the central focus of student life. Chinese students often outperform their counterparts in other countries in international standardized tests. While the students who persist in secondary and higher education in China are skilled in exams, key adults and the social environment support students in academic competition. In such a context, students' collective focus on test scores, fierce competition, publicized results, honed test-taking skills, and student-organized status systems based on test scores, all intertwine and contribute to Chinese students' relatively high performance in academic competitions.

American educators often criticize that training students to focus on exams harms student motivation, alienate students from learning, and suppress student creativity. Chinese and other East Asian educators share this opinion and argue that exam systems train students to focus on rote memory. However, there is evidence that suggest the adolescent elites in China are critical and creative thinkers who have a desire to learn beyond what the school teaches them. The media circulated stories of Pinnacle students debating against teachers and winning the debate with great intellectual fervor (so-called "nailing teachers on the blackboard"). The example of Dapeng, who took over explaining test questions from his teacher, also showed that some students were not content with simply memorizing knowledge transmitted in classrooms. These examples demonstrate that students in exam systems are capable of independent thinking in the classroom.

The analyses presented in this study illuminate the importance of academic performance in shaping student identity and experiences in school. Scholars typically examine test scores as an explanatory variable to one's status. Yet, I showed that test scores were more than a factor that predicts one's future. Instead, test scores became the criterion of status, as it defines peer relationships and shape student interactions with adults. By focusing on the role of test scores, this study empirically demonstrates that test scores powerfully shape adolescent daily life. A better understanding of adolescence thus requires further examination of the role of test scores.

### **What Creates Little Emperors?**

Scholars and the public often refer to the singletons in China as little emperors who are spoiled by their parents. The little emperor phenomenon partially explains the entitlement from being the only child, especially those from elite families. However, not every child is a little emperor. As I have shown in this study, test scores played an important role in determining which students were highly entitled and who were not. I showed that teachers did not treat students according to their family background in China, but rather treated students according to who had high test scores.<sup>69</sup> Parents did not constrain or supervise children according to class-based parent styles, but by the child's test scores. These examples provide evidence that, in addition to family socioeconomic status or household demographics, test scores or educational achievement were critical in creating little emperors in China.

Studies show that the little emperors are not limited to elite adolescents, but are observed among the middle- and working-classes (Fong 2005). However, the fact that not all

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<sup>69</sup> Some studies find that student interactions with teachers both shape and vary by student status in school (Cohen and Lotan 1995; Cohen et al. 1989; McFarland 2004).

elite adolescents behaved similarly points to the substantial variation in the degrees of entitlement among elite students. In anecdotal accounts, some children even felt “enslaved” as they shoulder the family’s educational desires. This suggests the little emperor phenomenon may not be as common as portrayed in the media. Instead, it could be an age-based treatment that is observed primarily among young children.

### **Elite Perceptions of Social Inequality**

Research on elite students is rare. To my knowledge, this is the first study that examined socioeconomic elite students in China. I provided an empirical portrait of the college preparation process for elite students who were also top performers in China. Specifically, I showed that the entitled high performers believed that they earned their high status and they hold status distinction as their due. In doing so, this study illuminates the process through which elite adolescents learn to self-identify as elite.

To the extent that these elite students are likely the future elites of society and that their adolescent perceptions are related to adult behaviors, how elite Chinese students award status to peers and how they defend the status quo carry implications for future social inequality. I have demonstrated that elite students who are high academic performers often are likely the future socioeconomic elites in the country. Top students have higher starting incomes, better start to establishing careers, and are more likely to have access to power elites in China than low status students. Furthermore, high school is a time when one is fixated on school status, but it is also a time when one is deeply aware of one’s future. Adolescence is an important link that connects childhood to adulthood. It is a period that opens doors to future opportunities and one that critically shapes the future for young people. Behaviors and values

taken on during one's youth often predict adulthood habits and ideas (Ferdinand and Verhulst 1995; Fite et al. 2010; Lubinski et al. 1996; McAdams et al. 2010; Waterman 1982). Considering that the elite students in this study have reasonably high chances of becoming future elites in China, students' justification of status hierarchies will likely impact domestic society and the global community. Specifically, the innate ability argument may affect how the future elites understand social inequality.

Student perceptions of peers' innate ability exaggerate the idea of meritocracy in the system. The argument does not recognize that non-elites without comparable family advantages are less likely to gain high test scores, and must often work hard to obtain similar test scores as their elite peers.<sup>70</sup> This rationale does not acknowledge the possibility that students may exacerbate social inequality. For example, elite students who could afford Western higher education will likely bring back new ideas and skills to China, whereas the non-elite students who studied domestically will not. All the students I observed conformed to and sustained the school hierarchy and believed that school status predicted future status. Hence, by accepting the school hierarchy, students learned to support an unequal society that sorted people into different status groups. By justifying the interaction patterns associated with status, students learned to justify social inequality.

Social inequality in China has increased rapidly (Xie 2016; Xie and Zhou 2014). However, if the future socioeconomic elites in the country believe that the poor or less-educated masses are worse-off due to innate inferiority, they are unlikely to find issue with increased inequality.

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<sup>70</sup> Although this study does not directly compare elite with non-elite families, others show that non-elite families do not share the same amount or type of resources and do not engage in identical types of parenting styles (Chen et al. 2010; Hanafin and Lynch 2002; Horvat et al. 2003; Lareau 2000; Tam and Chan 2009). Considering the cost associated with sending children to Western universities, non-elite families are unlikely to pursue this route as a backup for *gaokao* failure.

They are also likely to have limited motivation for designing effective policies for poverty relief or narrow rural-urban income gaps. Many scholars and politicians view China as a rising economic and political power. Yet, if the future Chinese elites consider comparatively less-developed countries as deservingly poor, international society should not rely on China to play a strong role in offering assistance to those countries.

There are indications that the future of social inequality is not as bleak as implied, as some elite students in China are aware of their class-based privileges in an unequal society. Among them is Xuan'ang Xiong, a student in Beijing No. 2 High School who was the top scoring student in Beijing in 2017. When reporters asked him about the secret to gaokao success, he attributed his high scores to his family background:

“I don't worry about food or clothes, my parents are both highly educated, and [I] grew up in a big city like Beijing. These exceptionally advantaged educational resources are completely exclusive to [students like me]. All top students nowadays are the rich and smart type. My parents are both diplomats. Because I had a firm foundation in every step of the way, the chips naturally fell into places.”<sup>71</sup>

Although Xiong may be an exception among his top-performing, elite peers, his explanation has been broadcasted on the media. The broadcast of this type of social-structural explanation may be analogous to dropping a pebble into water, creating ripples that, perhaps through influencing other elite students, will introduce change towards greater social equality.

### **Beyond the Chinese Context**

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<sup>71</sup> Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rQohls7iWSQ>.

Every society is unique and China is no exception. Chinese and American societies share certain similarities. For example, both have increased levels of inequality (Li et al. 2013; Saez and Zucman 2016; Xie and Zhou 2014) and parents are concerned about children's educational achievements (Chen et al. 2010; Chin 2002; Huntsinger and Jose 2009; Lareau 2011; Lareau et al. 2016; Lau 2014; Lau et al. 2011; McDonough 1997; McIntyre et al. 2007). However, the educational system and student selection processes differ considerably. The strong, mutual emphasis on test scores in Beijing is likely a necessary condition for students to construct a unidimensional status system based on test scores. Without a strong focus on exams, American students unlikely construct the same hierarchy in school.

Compared to the focus on exams in China, college admission in the U.S. takes into account various criteria of student achievement. Educators and scholars in the U.S. argue that standardized tests are subject to discrimination, provide limited information on students, do not reflect student diversity, and do not generate higher thinking (Bransford et al. 1999; Supovitz and Brennan 1997). Thus, while SAT scores are a crucial element, they are not generally sufficient since admissions officers also emphasis being "well rounded." Instead, educators advocate for a student selection method that acknowledges multiple types of intelligence, is effort-based, promotes motivation, and takes advantage of the multicultural character of American society (Garcia & Pearson 1991; Gardner 1993; Resnick and Hall 1998; Taylor 1994). The American scholars' preferred method of student assessment, however, is not without concern. Some of its weaknesses include the inability to establish a standard for evaluations and the need of more evidence of the effectiveness and objectiveness in student assessments (Baker et al. 1993; Burger and Burger 1994; Linn and Baker 1996; Stecher and Klein 1997). Emphasis on well-roundedness is also criticized as an elite practice developed to address the

overrepresentation of the Jews, an academically high-performing but socially-marginalized group, in top universities (Golden 2006; Karabel 2006). While scholars acknowledge these shortcomings, the American scholastic community nonetheless prefers a system that selects well-rounded students into college over relying on test scores.

However, these perceptions in the U.S. are not shared by educators and scholars in China, who argue that the *gaokao* is a fair and efficient way of student selection (Jiang 2007; Liu 2011; Zheng 2007). Scholars argue that the current exam system promotes social mobility by minimizing family influence on exam results (Ho 1962; Liang et al. 2013). Since student information is condensed into a number, colleges cannot identify student background. There is also no legacy admission in this system, so families cannot use their class-based resources (e.g. political power, economic resources, social network, etc.) to obtain admissions for their children. Although the intention is to set up an assessment system that is the least biased, there are loopholes in which family wealth comes into play. Media reports admissions officers in Renmin University gave extra points for purchases as late as 2013. At least one parent whom I came to know during fieldwork acknowledged that they could have purchased admission to top universities.<sup>72</sup> Under the exam system, purchasing admission is illegal and these activities face government crackdown. For example, after the news about Remin University broke, the government not only issued change in admission personnel, but withdrew the university from holding additional tests in the following year.

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<sup>72</sup> I met a parent who was not part of the study attested to the practice of purchasing admissions. The father told me that he had a daughter in middle school. Although the daughter attended the best middle school, he was worried about her college placement. After gulping down his cup of tea, he said, "Twenty years ago I told my friends that I can, I have the money, to get his kid into Tsinghua University." The father then explained the procedure. He would call the admissions office, have tea with an officer, and make a hefty donation. He then put down his cup on the table and threw his hands up, "But not anymore. There's no way to buy admission nowadays."



No system is perfect in promoting social equality and an exam system has its strengths as well as weaknesses. While exam systems are intended to select students based on merit, the system does not always deliver its promise. With few exceptions (Park 2008), scholars often find that standardized tests are class-based selection, as children from high socioeconomic backgrounds consistently have higher test scores than disadvantaged children (Buchmann et al. 2010; Jencks and Phillips 1998; Shavit and Blossfeld 1993; VanTassel-Baska and Willis 1987). Similarly, Chinese scholars are also concerned with inequality embedded in the Chinese exam system (Li et al. 2015; Liang 2013; Wang et al. 2013; Ye 2015; Yeung 2013; Yi 2012). These findings suggest that exam selection does not enhance social equality, but may even exacerbate existing class-based inequality by widening the socioeconomic gap in test scores (Byun and Kim 2010). To address inequality, scholars call for changes in the educational policy in the U.S. (Alon 2015). However, Chinese scholars infrequently promote educational reform or alternative methods for student selection. Instead, they call for government intervention and equal educational resources (Yang 2012).

From a global perspective, what is unique may not be China's exam system, but the American system. While the college admission system in the U.S. is similar to that in Germany and the Philippines, many more countries share a comparable system with China. About two-thirds of the OECD countries use exams to determine educational advancement (Furuta et al. 2016). In the U.K., Sir Godfrey Thomson promoted using mental test scores<sup>73</sup> to select British children for secondary education since 1947 based on the argument that test-based selection provided more chances of upward mobility for children from humble backgrounds (Sharp 1997). Students in Canada compete for university admission based solely on their high school GPA. In

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<sup>73</sup> The Moray House Test is a single tested use to sort 11-year-old children into educational programs in Britain that started in 1947.

France, the Grandes Écoles rank and admit students by their exam scores. Even in the U.S., admission officers try to woo the highest performing students and maximize the incoming cohorts' average SAT scores (Stevens 2007). In fact, American education seems to be moving toward higher levels of standardized testing. Despite the critics, the "No Child Left Behind Act" (2001) and its successor, the "Every Student Succeeds Act" (2010), both emphasize the use of standardized assessments to measure student performance.

Considering the increasingly high degree of test-based student selection in the U.S., the unidimensional status hierarchy observed among elite students in China could be a cautionary tale for future American teenagers.<sup>74</sup> Some scholars caution that American teenagers already participate in high levels of exam competition (Alon and Tienda 2007; Buchmann et al. 2010; Demerath 2009; Milner 2015; Radford 2013; Stevens 2007). Due to pressure in academic competition, students have significantly increased enrollments in AP courses and attendance in "shadow education" during high school (Buchmann et al. 2010; Milner 2015). High schools in turn respond to the pressure of producing academic competitive applicants with grade inflation (Demerath 2009). Furthermore, the fact that the elite Chinese students in this study were successfully enrolled in various top American universities suggests that viewing U.S. college admissions as an exam system is a fruitful approach. After all, despite the American emphasis on well-rounded characteristics (Furuta 2017; Karabel 2006), the international-bound students in

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<sup>74</sup> There are also signs of change in the Chinese education system, which seems to lean towards the American system. Policies directed at changing the exam system are under way, such as students have interviews in the extra point system and may need to submit portfolios for extra points from certain universities or departments. These are ways that allow educators to recognize multiple talents and not focus on a single test score. Yet, the changing practices may also reproduce the caveats commonly observed in American education system, such as ethnic disparities and class-based influences on college outcomes.

this study nevertheless went to top colleges by focusing on the SAT.<sup>75</sup> To the degree that test-based assessments are increasingly important for educational advancement in general and especially for college, American students may develop a school hierarchy that resembles the unidimensional one observed in this study.

### **Changes in American Classrooms**

Understanding Chinese student hierarchies is useful for educators outside of China. As Chinese students are arriving on the American coasts at increasing numbers, educators can expect changes in classroom or campus atmosphere. Chinese international students outnumber other international students in Canada, Britain, and Australia. These students arrive with set ideas of unidimensional status hierarchies and might construct the same type of status system on American campuses. In doing so, they might considerably increase the intensity of academic competition. Jimenez and Horowitz (2013) show that this is already taking place in California, where increased numbers of Asian American students contribute to heightened degrees of academic competition in school. This might be a welcomed change to educators who lament the lack of focus on academic performance in the U.S. Yet, they also might introduce unwelcomed changes to campus. For example, Chinese students are less interested in sports than American students. When a sizable portion of the student body is uninterested and does not participate in

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<sup>75</sup> Multiple reasons account for the elite students' overall success in college applications. The Chinese students' focus on test scores may align with admission officers' goal in increasing average test scores in each incoming freshmen cohort (Stevens 2007). Admission criteria for international students might be different from those for domestic students. American universities might take into consideration an international's ability to enroll as a full-fee paying student in admission decisions, which would give advantage to the socioeconomic elites in this study. Nonetheless, if all else equal, the test-based strategy produces successful results.

collegial activities, changes in student interest resulting from the influx of Chinese students may lead to changes in the activities traditionally sponsored by educational institutions.

Educators in the U.S. may also need to change pedagogy and methods of classroom management. Having more Chinese students in the classroom in high school or college might lead to higher levels of teacher-student cooperation and mutual focus on college preparation. In this setting, teachers can spend less time evoking student participation in the classroom and instead focus on the content of course materials. On the one hand, this might broaden the scope and extend the depth of course discussions. Teachers can go through the same amount of material in relatively shorter times than in an uncooperative classroom. On the other hand, the Chinese families will expect teachers to take on most of the responsibility in preparing students for college. Teachers might also have difficulty discerning whether students have genuine interests in subject materials. Instead of being concerned with managing an orderly classroom, teachers would need to spend more time and energy in providing directions for students.

In short, the arrival of Chinese students in American and other Western classrooms will likely affect existing dynamics in the classroom. Student-teacher interactions will have different nuances, as well as peer relationships and academic competition. Considering the fact that Chinese students are typically the largest group of international students in various western countries, the findings help educators to anticipate the changes that might occur and facilitate educators in their interaction with Chinese students in the classroom. Research can examine the ways students from a unidimensional status hierarchy adjust to multidimensional hierarchies and vice versa. Understanding how students sort each other into status groups and justify unequal status according to the features of the status hierarchy remain important challenges for future research.

## EPILOGUE: AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

In winter 2012, Brandon's parents woke him up at around 5:30am. He grudgingly got out of his bed and found his parents greeting him with big smiles on their faces. They happily announced that he got in to the University of California, Los Angeles, which was Brandon's second choice. They then asked if he wanted to have breakfast with enthusiasm. His parents had woken up before sunrise, at 5am, to check his admission results. Being overwhelmed with joy, they tried but could not hold back delivering the news. Brandon said something like, "Oh, good." He was glad, but he went back to bed because he felt too sleepy to celebrate at the moment. The parents spent the next hour being happy as they waited for Brandon to have breakfast together on the big day.

About half a year later, Shiyong told me that she woke up at around 9am to see her entire extended family sitting in the living room on June 23, 2013. It was the day that *gaokao* scores were released. Her aunts, uncles, and the cousin who moved in to accompany her during the *gaokao*, all sat on the sofa, chatting and congratulating her parents. The whole family was eagerly waiting to witness the moment when Shiyong, the prodigy in the family, was accepted to Tsinghua University. Shiyong felt a bit uncomfortable, but there was no way out. Her relatives would be there at least until noon, for another 3 hours, when *gaokao* results were available. At about 11:55am, Shiyong retreated from the living room and went back to her room. She turned on the desktop and logged into the website with her ID and password. Her mother followed and anxiously stood behind her. Maybe the family in the living room lowered their volume; maybe they became quiet, or maybe they were talking just as loud as before. Shiyong was too nervous to tell. The cutoff score for Tsinghua admission last year was 615 (out of 750). The exam was

easier this year, so a safer bet was to score at least 650. At noontime, Shiyang refreshed the webpage and saw that she received 667. On top of that, she had 20 extra points. That very moment, she knew she would be a Tsinghua freshman in the coming fall. The mother rushed to spread the news to the family. Shiyang was relieved and slowly walked over to join the celebration.

All of the students in this study entered college the year they graduated high school. The interviewees in this study were a particularly successful bunch. Among the 24 domestic-bound students, 10 went to Tsinghua or Peking University; 5 of the 12 international-bound students went to top universities that were their first choices in the U.S. or U.K. Even the less successful ones went into top-tier universities in China and selective universities that U.S. or France. For the students in this study, successfully going to college meant that many years of test competition and college preparation paid off, and they were eager to have a change in lifestyle. Yet, as excited as they were for college, the students were often worried about their future in college universities. As Na said in our interview,

“I don’t think it’s a complicated [feeling], but our ignorance about the future, not knowing what will happen in the future, nobody knows what will happen, we’re kind of terrified.”

There are reasons for the students to be worried. After all, college life is different from high school. While high schools students have a unidimensional status hierarchy, this was unlikely to be the norm in college. In college, students have an abundant selection of activities to participate and daily routines are not determined by admission exams. Test scores or GPA are no longer public information, and there are no bulletin boards that publicized each other’s test scores on a regular basis. Students are in communication with many more adults, not just

teachers and parents, who hold various values and behave differently. Society does not place as high emphasis on college GPA as it did on the *gaokao* or the SAT. Simultaneously, however, there is some motivation for students to establish a unidimensional status hierarchy in college using the same criterion as in high school. Jobs prospects are often take into account their college GPA. Graduate school admissions are related to GPA and rankings in the department. Academic competition is even fiercer in college than in high school. The students at top universities in China must compete with top students from other provinces; those in the U.S. or U.K. would compete with top students around the world.

Curious about how the students sorted peers into different status groups in college, I followed the students up to four years after high school graduation. Faced with much fiercer competition, many students were no longer top performers in their classrooms or departments. Yet, the students continued to see the status system as unidimensional, albeit with minor differences.

Among those who stayed in China, top performing students enjoyed elevated status among peers. For example, Shiyang was still the top performer in college who many students knew. Capital celebrated her achievements and reporters wrote about her life history upon college graduation. While Intellectuals still received high levels of peer admiration, there were also signs of loosening of the unidimensional status hierarchy, as Shuhua, Lili, and Dehong criticized top performing classmates from outer provinces as bookworms who “studied like crazy” and “were way too competitive,” while Beijing students had ease. When I visited Lili, I asked her what she thought about classmates from other provinces. She replied,

“[Beijingers] have a more well-rounded education. Like, we participate in many school activities, we take on leadership positions, but those students just study in the dorms and in the libraries all day long.”<sup>76</sup>

Nonetheless, while ease became more important, students continued to choose test scores over ease. An example is Fei. To stay high performing, Fei became visibly hard-working. He spent all summer in the university library to study for the GRE and broke up with his girlfriend to focus on applying to graduate school in the U.S. Jianmin, who failed to get into any university in Mainland China despite having high performance in school, was traumatized by his downward mobility. As a result, he worked hard throughout college. During a visit to Taiwan, he flaunted his 3.85 GPA on his phone when we had lunch. He was also determined to go to the best graduate school in his field as redemption. These examples suggest that the students in Chinese continued to perceive test scores as having the highest value even beyond high school. In other words, despite changes in the degree to which ease is important, test scores remains the foundation of the unidimensional status hierarchy in college.

Most of the internationally-bound students continued to see school status as a unidimensional system based on test scores. When I visited the students, they often told me that they were surprised that they outperformed native-speaking counterparts. Despite only having learned French after high school, Jiaqi became a straight-A student by sophomore year and regularly attended live concerts around Europe. He self-identified a top student and has renewed confidence in himself. Tony, Joe, and Alex all received above 3.8 in their GPAs, which were higher than the American students. Reflecting on their academic competitiveness

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<sup>76</sup> Oddly, this seems parallel to the American elite higher education, where well-rounded characteristics are glorified above academic achievement after the Jewish outperformed others in academic performances, as described by Karabel (2006).



compared to natives, the students thought of their American peers as “stupid” and claimed that American students were uncompetitive. Even if the native speakers initially seemed highly academically competitive, some of the students soon realized that they were not. I asked Stacey about her semester when walking together on the streets of Philadelphia.

Stacey grabbed my shoulder and looked as if she had a revelation. “You know what? At first, I thought [American students] all knew the stuff in class [because] they kept speaking up. But I did the readings, and I soon found out that they didn’t! There’s no substance in their talk, it’s just words!”

Not all students in the U.S. were top performing. Song relied on American classmates for lecture notes at George Washington University and was thankful toward her classmates who willingly helped her to overcome the language barrier. Claire was another student who felt outperformed by peers. When I visited her at Yale, she told me that she had scored below average in calculus.

“I cried for days!” She then sighed, “But I couldn’t do anything about it. Some people are just too smart here.” Later, when Claire walked me to the train station, she said with tears rolling in her eyes, “I see everyone around me and think that they’re all better than I am.” She blinked and then half-joking, half-seriously added, “I have an inferiority complex here.”

Claire in fact had a more colorful life at Yale than at Capital. While she used to skip lunch for work in high school, she joined a dance club and a sorority in college. However, despite demonstrating higher levels of ease than she used to, Claire felt inferior to other students who scored higher in midterms and finals. This feeling points out that the students in this study

continued to evaluate and sort peers into different status positions in a unidimensional hierarchy.

In my many visits to the students in Beijing and various cities in the U.S., the students I followed perceived college status as being similar to that in high school. Students assigned peers who were high performing and simultaneously at ease into high status. They expressed admiration towards Intellectuals and those with very high test scores. Additionally, they continued to support the status system regardless of their positions in the hierarchy. These snippets of students' life after high school suggest that the unidimensional status hierarchy they constructed was not limited to high school years, but shaped student experiences in college.

As of 2017, the students who graduated college smoothly transitioned to PhD programs in the U.S., took positions in international corporations, consulting firms, or volunteered at large NGOs. As they embark on their careers and join adult society, they are unlikely to value test scores as they have in school. With competition for power economic resources also in the playing field, how the students draw on their experiences in a unidimensional status hierarchy to navigate a new (multidimensional) status hierarchy is in need of further scholastic examination.

## APPENDIX 1. ELITES

### **Who are the Elites?**

Empirical measures of elite status are often contested and there is not a consensus on the best empirical measures of elite. Classic studies of typically define elites as those who have power and dominance over others. For example, Mills (2000) considers elites as a small group of people who control the economy and whose decisions have great consequences for the masses. Giddens (1972) sees the ruling class as the elites in British society. Similarly, Domhoff (1976) focuses on elites are those who use authority to control social institutions. However, other scholars acknowledge multiple types of elites and suggest that elites are not limited to the economic-political sphere, but exist in all fields of occupation. A perhaps a more general definition refers to elites as those who outperform others in the activity under examination. In his study of Olympic swimmers, Chambliss's (1989) defines elite athletes as those who are top-performing in major athletic competitions. Studies on digital space define elite status in cyberspace by the number of followers and retweets (Nilizadeh et al. 2016; Westerman et al. 2012). In the science community, academics who hold membership or positions with the highest academic honor in the country are often the elites in their respective fields of expertise (Cao 2004).

Without focusing on a particular group of people such as athletes, academics, or political leaders, one prominent approach is to define elite by high socioeconomic status, measured by a combination of income, wealth, education, or occupation. However, different studies have distinct cutoffs for an individual to qualify as an elite. In their data, Page and colleagues (2013) focused on the top 1% income and the top 0.1% wealthy. By comparison, most other studies

(especially surveys) have difficulty capturing sufficient number of cases in a representative sample. As a result, the definitions of elite are often exceedingly generous and capture members of the middle- or upper-middle class. For example, Rivera considers any individual who is “in the top quintile of household incomes, with formal educational credentials of the highest magnitude and/or institutional status ...or [who] work in the most prestigious fields of employment” as elite (2015:294). Even defining adolescent elite is sometimes difficult. Research on elite education often focus on demographic characteristics, such as coming from families of the top 20% of household income and/or attending schools with 30% chances of Ivy League admission (Khan 2011; Rivera 2015). However, others use top academic performance as the main criterion for elite status (Kipnis 2011; Radford 2013). Yet another approach is to define elite students by their exclusive practices and self-distinction (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009; Gaztambide-Fernández and Maudlin 2016).

The criteria for elite status is also contextually specific. Elites in China are typically those with high positions in the party or government, successful entrepreneurs, or distinguished scientists (Cao and Suttmeier 2001; Nee 1991; Walder et al. 2000). However, the substantial regional disparity in China has led studies to adopt additional, distinct definitions of elite. At the national level, some scholars emphasize that Chinese elites have desirable *hukou* that allows them to become permanent residents in urban areas (Fan 2002). Chinese elites also must have high levels of education, as the importance of education surpassed that of having a worker/proletariat/communist background (Li and Walder 2001). At a regional level, studies also consider those who occupy top positions in rural villages as elites (Chen 2006), despite their relatively lower income compared to urbanites on a national scale.

Studies on Chinese education commonly equate elite status with top academic performance. In this definition, elite students are those with high test scores, elite schools are those with high admission rates to top universities. Yet, whether one school or student is elite also depends on the region. For example, Kipnis (2011) labeled students in Huang Shan middle school as elite. As of 2015, Huang Shan middle school reported that 26% of the student body passed the top band of the *gaokao* cutoff score (*yibenxian*). While this rate is among the highest in Shandong province (where the school is located), it is low compared to top high schools in Beijing, where over 99% of the students pass the cutoff score. At a national scale, the government concentrates investment in selected universities in the nation, which led some scholars to define those as the elite higher educational institutions in China (Yeung 2013). However, Beijing enjoys far more educational resources than elsewhere in China. For example, in the “Double Top University (*shuang yi liu*)” policy, eight of the 42 universities selected for government concentrated investment are in Beijing. This unequal distribution of resources has led to significant rural-urban disparity in education. Having abundant educational opportunities, elite students in Beijing understandably only consider Peking and Tsinghua University as top universities. These examples point to the need of taking into account the substantial regional disparities when examining the so-called elites in China.

For the purpose of this study, I use top 10% income and college education as the primary definition of elite status. I adopt this definition because it takes into account China’s rapid socioeconomic development in the past few decades and the traditional emphasis on intellectual prowess. To maintain clarity, I term students and schools with top academic performance as top-performing students and top schools. Specifically, the elites in this study were in the top 10% income distribution in China, held upper-managerial positions in the

government or military, were college educated, and had urban *hukou*. In terms of income, the median for families in this study was about twice the amount of top 10% income in urban China and over four times the average of a government employee in Beijing. All of the families indicated they were able to pay for American university should the child decide to go to the U.S. for higher education. Interviewee reports of family income and underreporting income has been prevalent among the wealthiest 10 percent in China (Wang and Woo 2011). I suspect the parent and student interviewees underreported their family income by excluding “grey income,” which is unofficial income and a figure that is likely many times over the amount of taxed income. I did not collect data on the families’ wealth, but most of them have one or two apartments in Beijing. Some students later revealed that the parents had assets in other provinces. In terms of occupation, all but one student have at least one parent in upper-managerial or professional occupation, and two-thirds of the families are affiliated with the military or work in the government. All but one family has at least one college-educated parent. Finally, every participant has a Beijing *hukou*.

Because I have missing information on some of the parent’s’ positions (especially those with military affiliations) and was worried about underreported family income, I also asked the teachers to validate whether student families were socioeconomically elite. In one occasion, I interviewed a student at his house and left with the impression that the family did not seem socioeconomically elite. When I brought up this question to the homeroom teacher, who smiled and said to me, “Don’t be fooled by the family situation you saw.” She explained that she was certain that the student was elite based on his family records. The apparent austerity I observed, which initially also surprised her, “was an intentional choice the parents made, so [the child] won’t grow up spoiled.” I later confirmed the family’s high income with the mother’s

report—the parents had considered sending the child to an American University as a full fee-paying student should he fail to get into his dream school in China. Since teachers had detailed and confidential information on student family backgrounds and were natives in the field, their perspectives increased my confidence that the families in this study are part of the new socioeconomic elites in China.

### **Status and Academic performance**

Some studies in the U.S. and Europe link academics to status. The relationship between academics and status, however, is somewhat dubious. These studies define academics in three ways, including (1) the amount of time spent on studying, (2) educational attainment such as years of education, and (3) measures of educational achievement such as test scores or GPA. All three types of academics are related to status, albeit in different ways.

Studies that adopt the first approach show that students generally associate long periods of time spent on studying with low status: those who spend most time studying are often socially isolated, sanctioned by peers, and do not have high status (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Coleman 1961; Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009; Khan 2011; Milner 2015). Similar to the students described in this body of literature, the students in this study also considered time spent on studying as negatively related to school status. Scholars suggest that the negative association may be due to norms of student schedules. In the U.S., students typically spend most of their time in non-academic activities. Arum and Roksa's (2011) find that students spend only 16% of their time in academic pursuits such as attending class/lab and studying. Yet, Eckert (1989) shows that that "jocks," who participates more in school activities, have higher status than the "burnouts," who withdraw from school- and academic-related activities. In addition,

students in China have a different schedule from American students, but nonetheless associate high levels of effort with relatively low status. Another concern is that, by focusing on time use, the relative importance of time spent on studying and the result of time use is underemphasized. This study shows time spent on studying is relatively less important than test score among elite students in China. Other students may have different priorities.

When defining academics as educational attainment, studies show that attendance in top institutions is critical for elite students because it leads to future elite occupational status (Hartmann 2007; Lee and Brinton 1996; Rivera 2015). In this approach, class-based distinction is evident in the fact that privileged class backgrounds are associated with higher educational attainment regardless of countries and periods under examination (Blau and Duncan 1967; Wu and Xie 2003). Studies that examine academic attainment often treat students from similar institutions as having identical credentials and status. Researchers categorize students in elite schools (however defined) as having elite status by virtue of their attendance at these schools (Cookson and Persell 1985; Khan 2011; Kipnis 2011; Weis et al. 2014). Potential employers perceive graduates of comparable institutions as having the same status on the occupation market (Deterding and Pedulla 2016). However, whether the students in these studies agree with the researcher definition is less clear and there is evidence that not all elite students in the same school are not all alike (Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009). Furthermore, grouping students from the same types of schools into the same status group glosses over important differences within a seemingly homogeneous group of individuals. As a result, this approach underemphasizes and differences among students groups and does not shed light on the mechanisms behind nor the process of status formation (Lamont et al. 2014).



A third approach is to define academics as educational achievement, or academic performance such as GPA or test scores. This is also the definition that the students and hence this study adopts. Research that uses this perspective frequently shows that academic performance is either not important or related to low school status. Among non-elites or the general student body, scholars show students associate high academic performance with low status (Coleman 1961; Foley 1991; Milner 2015). Similarly, studies of elite students suggest that academic performance as an important but not essential criterion to school status (Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009). Academic performance is even negatively related to school status, as affluent students sometimes associate academic mediocrity with high status in school (Mijs and Poulle 2016). Despite the common perception of academic performance being unimportant to students, researchers also point out that adolescents are experiencing greater academic pressure in recent years (Demerath 2009; Millner 2015). Weis et al. (2014) also interviewed some students who used performances to self-distinguish from others who they consider as the “normal people.” While insightful, these studies tend to consider academic performance as a static characteristic and insufficiently situate the students in their respective educational contexts. Consequently, the school status systems as portrayed have unnecessarily rigid boundaries, allow for limited (or too small) degrees of mobility, and do not examine of the intricate connections between the educational system and school status.

## APPENDIX 2. DATA AND METHODS

### Gaining Access

I consider myself extremely lucky to have gained access to various top high schools in Beijing. My access to the high schools came through a series of weak ties and contingencies. I gained access to Capital through multiple family friends. One family friend who sat on Capital's math curriculum supervisory board introduced me to Mr. Long, the head teacher of the 11<sup>th</sup> grade cohort, who gave me access to the 11<sup>th</sup> grade cohort. Another family friend who was college classmates with the former principal of Capital helped me gained full access to Capital. I entered Pinnacle by the introduction of a third family friend, a renowned academician whose name opened the door to Pinnacle through the head math teacher, Mr. Hu, who in turn obtained unconditional approval from the principal. With the name of the family friend, the principal granted me access without any question. In fact, the principal never met with me despite my requests to explain my research. These two school allowed me to access classrooms (conditional on homeroom teachers' consent) and granted me the freedom to talk to any student on campus.

My initial frenzy in searching for field sites yielded restricted access to other schools. A fourth family friend, a retired math professor in a Normal University (institutions that specialize in training teachers), introduced me to his former students, Mr. Lai, a math teacher in Highland and Mr. Li, the principal in Central. While Mr. Lai and Mr. Li introduced me to individual students, my access was limited and I could not enter classrooms or contact other students. A fifth family friend, the wife of the friend who sat on Capital's math board, introduced me to her college classmate, Mrs. Tang, a biology teacher in Emperor. My condition of access in Emperor

was that I stay in a meeting room and the students come to meet me during break. I came to know students in Omega through a friend of a friend, who happened to go to the same gym with Xiangzu, a student in Omega, who enlisted his friends to participate in a group interview with me near Omega.

The degrees of access granted by each school depended on the status relationships between my “guarantors” —all of whom family friends— and the school personnel. I could conduct classroom observation in Capital and Pinnacle because my contacts either were close to the principal or had higher academic status than the principal had. For example, Mr. Long, in his power, granted me access to 11<sup>th</sup> grade, but the vice principal of Capital rejected my request to observe 12<sup>th</sup> graders. Upon hearing this, the other family friend took me to visit Capital’s retired principal, who overrode the vice principal’s initial decision with a phone call during our meeting. Other times, luck or timing shaped whether I could conduct observation. Omega was under serious attack by a reporter when I started fieldwork and the school closed its door to research activities. A Capital parent not in this study suggested that my limited access to Central might be due to poor relationship between the principal and parents. Since he was under scrutiny at the time, he could not have allowed any foreign research activity on campus despite being the principal.

In the schools I visited, teachers and principals introduced me to a selected group of students through whom I became acquainted with the other students. Upon entry, I specified my interest in studying students from wealthy, elite backgrounds. Teachers later reported adding additional criteria when selecting the students such as sociability and high academic performance “to maintain the school’s image.” Without a full understanding of my research topic, Mr. Hu “randomly” selected six students from the classroom who, in his opinion,

“represented a good variety of different types of high performing students.” The students, however, suspected that Mr. Hu might have put much thought into their selection. Explaining their friendship circle as if it were a math function, Jianmin reported that, “Any two of us were friends, but no three of us were good friends.” In Capital, teachers introduced me to students who were the ideal representatives of the school (such as Shiyang and Claire) or who could benefit the most, such as Lili. In the teachers’ words, “having a companion would encourage [Lili] and make her more confident about the *gaokao*.” I also speculate that Mr. Long introduced me to Jiaqi in hope that having a shadow would motivate him to work hard, as his mother did.

### **Researcher’s Role**

Being their “big sister (*jiejie*),” the students felt comfortable talking to me about a variety of topics. They confided in me secrets not shared with others or parents, knowing that I would keep those secrets. Students shared gossip with me, about who pursued who, which ones dated, and who broke up. They made sure that I abided by school regulations as they did, such as warning me not to use cell phones in the classroom. In multiple instances, the students tried to fit me into their status system. I was close to a Studiaholic by virtue of being a Ph.D. student at an Ivy League university who moved to Beijing for research. However, I never moved up the system likely because I failed to answer most of their test questions and had typos in English. When my performance did not match my alleged status, the students would make up excuses for me, such as “You made that mistake on purpose,” or “It’s been ten years since you took the *gaokao*.” It was quite fun seeing the students struggle to sort me into a status group and then justify my unexpectedly incorrect answers.

Having established a rapport with the participants, I was equally familiar with students of both genders, albeit with different degrees of closeness that were in line with local customs. Boys were especially interested in being shadowed and competed about who had the most participation in my research. Girls initially did not approach me, although I heard that some of them wanted to have lunch with me but were too shy to ask. I was able to observe girls after they felt comfortable having me as a shadow. Interestingly, boys initially keen to have a shadow had their zeal dwindle by the third day. For example, Brandon asked if he could end observations earlier; Jiaqi tried to get rid of me by saying that he was going to the men's bathroom when heading to an opposite direction. The pattern was opposite with girls. At first, girls seemed uncomfortable about having a shadow, but by the third day, they were so used to my presence that they would wait for me to join them wherever they went. As Lili put it, "It's actually kinda fun to have this one (me) following around. I thought it'd be weird, but it's kinda fun." By the end of my fieldwork, the girls and I had become considerably close. For example, Lili held my arm and took me into the *gaokao* test site. This feeling of closeness lasted well after the students went to college. When I visited Tracy at her university, we sat on a lawn to chat. Somewhere in the middle of our conversation, Tracy lied down and rested her head on my stomach as she talked about her dreams and future plans.

Since I approached the parents through the students, parents considered me as a member of the younger generation close to their children. My Ivy League student status helped me gain the trust of parents that I would be "good influence" on their exam-preparing or international-bound child, thereby securing parental consent for students' research participation. When hanging out with parents during family observations, parents sometimes commented that I looked like their child. Shiying's mother joked multiple times that we look like mother and

daughter when we waited for Shiyang outside a test location and when I accompanied her on a shopping trip. This older-younger generation relationship may have led some of the parents to refuse interview participation or, if agreed, to take an instructional tone in the interviews. However, this relationship may have also provided me a pass to visit students' homes, where I was welcomed as a friend of the student.

I established friendly relationships with the teachers. To visit the schools, I had to have a teacher sign me in at the school gate. Mr. Long and Mr. Hu took me under their wings and gave me access to Capital and Pinnacle whenever they were available. When they were not available, other teachers such as Tom in Capital and Ms. Wu in Pinnacle helped me get past the security guards. Capital and Pinnacle were exemplary high schools and often hosted groups of teachers from other provinces to observe teachers' pedagogy. My presence in the classrooms would have had minimal impact on how teachers behaved in the classroom, as many likely took me as one of the constant stream of observers on campus. The higher-ups in school who did not know me thought I was a student. I ran into the principal of Capital, Mr. Liu, multiple times when I roamed the campus with students. When Mr. Liu saw me in the domestic department, he asked about my *gaokao* preparation. When he saw me in the international department, he asked which American university admitted me. I explained that I was a researcher for the first few times. Later on, I simply replied, "It's going well." He would then nod, smile and say, "Good," and walk away with his hands behind his back, as the students hid their giggles aside.

### **Building Relationships**

It is customary for ethnographers to bring gifts to the field, and this is particularly important for doing fieldwork in Chinese societies. Elites in China have a custom of elaborate gift

giving as part of relationship building. As a graduate student, I was not able to match their budgets. However, I tried to give gifts that were nicely packaged and that might instill even a slight hint of high cultural taste. Godiva chocolate boxes were my go-to gifts for parents, since the gold-colored box with a ribbon looked elaborate. Plus, they were about two to three times more expensive in China. To thank the parents who allowed me to conduct home observations, I prepared comparatively elaborate gifts such as Swarovski pen or sets of skin care products. Despite my best efforts in declining gifts from the elite parents, I often headed to the interview with a small gift and returned with a more expensive one, such as a box of tea, which parents casually took out from a drawer in their offices. For the students, I brought Penn souvenirs, such as T-shirts or baseball hats. The teachers received small porcelain or pineapple cakes from Taiwan, based on the suggestions I solicited from Taiwanese researchers who collaborated with scholars from Mainland China.

I anticipated that the student participants might judge my appearance and decide whether to befriend me. Clothing thus became a conscious choice that required much effort and I always double-checked my wardrobe before heading to or revisiting the field. To simultaneously earn teachers' trust, parents' permission, and student' friendship, I needed to dress conservatively and comfortably. I filled my wardrobe with jeans, polo shirts, tennis shoes, and a name-brand jacket that was on sale (hence within budget). I did not dye or perm my hair and did not wear makeup except for tinted lip-gloss. Some students commented that I could be more fashionable. For example, Jiaqi disapprovingly commented that the color of my lip-gloss did not go with my shirt. Tracy asked why I did not wear skinny jeans or shorts to school. When answered it was to solicit the school's approval, Tracy sneered, showing her disregard of teachers' alleged preferences. Despite my apparent lack of fashion, the jacket likely saved the day—I caught a few

students checking out the large brand label in the front. They did not drop any comment, which I took as a signal of approval

### **Challenges in the Field: Entry, Adjustments, and Elite Entitlement**

Doing research in Beijing was difficult for a number of reasons. One unexpected hurdle was getting access to high schools. Initially, I entered the field hoping to learn about how middle-class and working-class student made college decisions. However, this plan took on a turn due to difficulty in finding working-class students in top high schools and lack of access to lower-ranked school, which admitted large numbers of working class students. Lack of access thus unintentionally turned the project into an inductive study, in which my attention gravitated towards status signals through prolong exposure to status terminologies. In fact, it was only after students repeatedly explained the status system that I realized the significance of school status merited a dissertation.

Even though I gained access to top high schools, the high levels of institutional caution of outsiders, especially reporters and terrorists, was slightly troublesome. High schools in Beijing are securely guarded. To get pass security at the school gates, I needed a schoolteacher to sign me in to campus every time. This meant that I could only enter the schools with a teacher's physical presence. This security policy did not greatly affect my access to Capital and Pinnacle, as the teachers are usually on campus and can to sign me in. Luckily, I found out that the guards at one particular side entrance in Capital rarely took shifts. After entering and exiting through that gate for months, the security guard stopped asking for my ID and teacher's assurance. Staying in the school was more difficult than I imagined, as personnel changes resulted in a school withdrawing previously granted access.



I had to exert extra caution for my background as a Taiwanese researcher from an American institution. Prior to entering the field, scholars have warned me to be wary of what I say or comment because government agents might pay close attention to my research activities. I did not think that my topic was politically loaded in any way, and I did not encounter any issue with my research, my background, or myself. Students sometimes asked me politically sensitive questions, such as where I stood in the cross-strait relationship. I used these as opportunities to let them know more about my family's immigration history and ethnic conflicts in Taiwan. Many students' parents affiliated with the military were careful about inviting me over to their apartments. Some asked me not to let anyone know about my visits to their house for fear that it may reflect badly on their careers. Considering that Capital and Pinnacle both had relatively large proportions of families in the military, I speculate that the general caution about foreign contact among military personnel may be part of the reason that some parents declined research participation.

My approach to fieldwork was similar to what Desmond (2016) described, an attempt to think as the informants think, feel as they feel, and walk as they walk. To do so, I decided to immerse myself in the Chinese context by moving there. I rented a pantry-converted room in a shared apartment in Capital's school district. Living in China for the first time required some adjustment. I realized that I completely underestimated the scope of Beijing city when the short distance on the map turned into a 1.5-hour single-way commute to Capital each day. The air quality was as poor as *New York Times* described, but no one on the streets wore dusk masks regardless of the level of air pollution and my friends made fun of the few foreigners who did. Health checkups after exiting the field suggested that I should have worn those masks, as X-rays revealed that exposure to the low air quality in Beijing resulted in dirty lungs. During my stay in

Beijing, I encountered food poisoning, fraudulent ticket agents, and other injuries, such as broken bones and injured spinal cords. Once, I fell so ill that my roommates seriously discussed about my chances of survival outside my room. Adjusting to the pace of Beijing also took some time. It took me three weeks to learn how to cross the street without feeling that I would be hit by some motor vehicle. The triumphal moment was when a middle-aged Chinese woman came up to me at the front gate of Omega and asked, “Miss, can I follow you across the street?” I could still see the relief on her face when I agreed. I never learned how to squeeze on to the subway during rush hour, but I grew comfortable letting people at the back push me in so they could hop on.

I also encountered a bit of challenge dealing with strong entitlement that elite students demonstrated. I learned that Julie expected me to pay for her when we went out for meals or movies. Some students felt entitled to make suggestions about improving my body image, such as Dehong took me aside in school and said, “I heard Papaya is good for women. You need to eat it to grow your boobs. You should be thankful that I don’t look down on you.” Another time, Zhuwei shouted at me in front of a classroom of students about my being single, “You’re such a leftover woman! You’re 27 and still not married, you leftover woman!” In these instances, I took student behavior or comments as signals of familiarity. Sometimes I tried to change the topic. When appropriate, I defended myself with academic etiquette, such as quoting statistics about the low probability that they themselves would be married by age 27.

### **Readjustment after Exiting the Field**

Beijing put things into perspective. When I returned to the U.S., I was surprised that people in New York Time Square gave each other such large personal space. I enjoyed the clean streets

of Philly, the friendly pedestrians, and nice drivers. I also had to readjust to language and interactional styles outside of China. I acquired a northern accent when speaking Mandarin. When the students said that I sounded like a Beijinger, even if just for a split second, I proudly took it as a stamp of approval from the natives in the field. However, people back home did not appreciate my new accent. Family members joked about my habitual use of Mainland terminologies (such as “research” is *yanjiu* in Taiwan, but *keyan* in China). Friends in Hong Kong and Taiwan admitted to avoiding or abruptly ending conversations with me because they found my newly acquired accent annoying. Three years after exiting the field, colleagues in southern China still noticed my “relatively standard” Mandarin in job interviews and those in Taipei made fun about my heavy Mainland accent. During the course of fieldwork, I acquired a habit of yelling at waiters, “Hey, waiter!” to get their attention and service. This was usual in Beijing, but was unacceptably rude in Taiwan. When I returned home, my parents kept an eye out on my behavior in public space for months and apologized to others for my rudeness.

Having immersed myself in the field for over a year, I had become accustomed to the participants’ way of thinking. For example, only after exiting the field did I realized that I unintentionally sorted students into different status categories according to the unidimensional status hierarchy that I observed. I grew accustomed to the students’ unnecessarily strict and rank-based definition to categorize “top” universities in China, the U.S., the U.K., and elsewhere. These habits eventually weakened after a while and I soon readjusted to the mainstream opinion.

Despite the challenges and hurdles for doing fieldwork in Beijing, I have become fond of the students and a firm supporter of their future endeavors. The participants’ hospitality and openness in sharing their lives still amazes me. Students reached out when they sensed I might

be in need of help. Lida texted me and offered to wire cash into my account upon hearing that I encountered a bank fraud. Fei biked me wherever I needed to go on campus when I hurt my foot. Shiyong organized a fieldtrip to a theme park upon hearing that I was interested in going. Mr. Hu offered me to stay in the teacher's office for few-minutes breaks and went the extra mile to make coffee, a rare commodity in school, so that I could go through 15 hours of day-long observation. Jiaqi's mother made me her famous dumplings from scratch for dinner each time I visited. Shiyong's mother welcomed me warmly every time I stopped by Beijing even years after exiting the field. Finally, parents and teachers' compliments about how well I spoke Chinese Mandarin, which was my native tongue, always amused me. These are among the many moments that were the highlights of my fieldwork.

<b>Table A1. Description of the Six High Schools in the Study</b>			
School	Ranking	Description	Research Activities
Capital	Top 10	Capital school was originally established for the children of military cadres. Capital now accepts students from all backgrounds, but remains closely connected to the powerholders in the military. Capital is known for its vast school grounds, high expenditures on student activities, and strong principal leadership in the innovative implantation of the national standardized curriculum.	School Observation, home observation, individual interviews, group interviews
Central	Top 10	Central school is affiliated with a top-ranked university. Most of the student parents are part of the educated elites in China. Central has a smaller student body compared to other schools and has a legacy of students being involved in social movements, especially during the Cultural Revolution.	Individual interviews
Highland	Top 10	Located near central Beijing, this school is affiliated with a top-ranked university and many students are from intellectual elite backgrounds. Highland boasts that it produces the top-performing students in Beijing. Highland does not have an international department for Chinese nationals.	Individual interviews
Omega	Top 10	Omega is considered to be one of the top high schools in the country, and is known for its overrepresentation of elite students whose families are closely connected to the Chinese government. Omega is also affiliated with a top-ranked university.	Group interviews
Pinnacle	Top 10	The school was established in the late Qing Dynasty and traditionally known as one of the best high schools in the country. Pinnacle is geographically close to military compounds and many students are from military backgrounds. Like Central, Pinnacle students were also highly involved in the cultural revolution and has a legacy of student-based social activism.	School Observation, home observation, individual interviews, group interviews
Emperor	Top 20	Located in central Beijing, this school is one of the oldest schools in China and was founded by foreign missionaries in the late Qing Dynasty. Emperor is known for its historical Chinese architecture. Like Highland, Emperor does not have an international department.	Group interviews

**Table A2. Information of the 36 Student Interviewees**

	School	Name	University	Test score (max=750)*	Parental Occupation	Research Participation <sup>+</sup>
<i>Domestic Department</i>						
Girl	Capital ('13)	Shiying Liu	Tsinghua University	667+20 (exemplary)	(F) Businessman (M) Professor	I, FI, PI, TI, CO, HO
	Capital ('13)	Shuhua Tien	Fudan University	639	(F) Engineer (M) Real estate	I, FI, CO
	Capital ('14)	Lili Zhu	Peking University	663+30 (univ. test)	(F) Professor (M) Architect	I, FI, PI, TI, CO
	Capital ('14)	Yulang Liu	Tsinghua University	678+60 (camp)	(M) Editor (single mother family)	I, FI, TI
	Central ('13)	Na Chen	Fudan University	n/a	(F) Marketing (M) Marketing	I
	Emperor ('13)	Fangyu Wu	Beijing Information Science & Technology University	n/a	(F) Doctor (M) Architect	GI, TI
	Omega ('13)	Mingming Yang	(friend guesses Renmin University)	n/a	(F) Manager (M) Homemaker	GI
	Omega ('13)	Yawen Ma	Tsinghua University	n/a	(F) Manager (M) Producer/Director	GI
	Pinnacle ('13)	Xijun Wu	National Academy of Fine Arts	627 (art exam)	(F) Chief editor (M) Engineer	I, PI, TI, CO
	Pinnacle ('14)	Huating Xue	University of Oxford	676	(F) Engineer (M) Accountant/manager	I, PI, TI
	Pinnacle ('14)	Mingjia Song	Tsinghua University	684+30 (univ. test)	(F) Civil servant (M) High school teacher	I, PI, TI
	Pinnacle ('14)	Pan Liu	Tongji University	665	(F) Upper level manger (M) Manager	I, TI
Boy	Capital ('13)	Jun Liu	Peking University	672 (Olympiad)	(F) Party branch secretary (M) University administrator	I
	Capital ('14)	Dehung Ke	Fudan University	668+5 (minority)	(F) Manager (M) High school teacher	I, FI, PI, TI, CO, HO

	Capital ('14)	Jiaqi Xu	Université de Technologie de Compiègne	608	(F) General manager (M) High school teacher	I, FI, PI, TI, CO, HO
	Emperor ('13)	Jinghao Ma	(Google search suggests China Medical University)	n/a	(F) Manager (M) Works at a bank	GI, TI
	Emperor ('13)	Ranzhi Liu	University of New South Wales	n/a	(F) Middle school teacher (M) Manager	GI, TI
	Emperor ('13)	Weicheng Mu	(friend guesses he went abroad)	n/a	(F) Entrepreneur (M) Works in family business	GI, TI
	Highland ('13)	Kefeng Zhou	Peking University	648 (Olympiad)	(F) Businessman (M) Professor	I, PI
	Omega ('13)	Xiangzu Liu	Nanjing University	n/a	(F) Manager (M) Accountant	GI
	Pinnacle ('13)	Fei Li	Tsinghua University	679 (Olympiad)	(F) Factory owner/veteran (M) Nurse (no college)	I, FI, PI, TI, CO, HO
	Pinnacle ('14)	Haocheng Zhang	Peking University	681+10 (Olympiad)	(F) Vice president (M) Civil servant	I, TI
	Pinnacle ('14)	Jianmin Wu	Lingnan University	641	(F) Worker (no college) (M) Editor	I, PI, TI
	Pinnacle ('14)	Wenbin Liu	Tsinghua University	691+40 (univ. test)	(F) Clerk (no college) (M) Cashier/Free-lance (no college)	I, TI
	School	Name	University	SAT score (max=2400)	Parental Occupation	Research Participation
<i>International Department</i>						
Girl	Capital ('13)	Claire Chen	Yale University	2330	(F) Manager (M) Doctor	I, PI, TI, CO
	Capital ('13)	Selina Su	University of Pennsylvania	2200	(F) Manager (M) Manager	I, FI
	Capital ('14)	Stacy Gao	Claremont McKenna College	2180	(F) Manager (M) Engineer	I, CO

	Capital ('14)	Tracy Zhou	Johns Hopkins University	2200	(F) Researcher (M) Finance	I, PI, TI, CO
	Central ('13)	Julie Jin	Bryn Mawr College	2170	(F) Professor (M) Homemaker	I, PI
	Pinnacle ('13)	Ashley Fong	Cambridge University	2230	(F) Engineer (M) Doctor	I, FI, PI, TI
Boy	Capital ('13)	Alex Liu	University of Southern California	2150	(F) Marketing and sales (M) Civil servant	I, FI, PI, TI
	Capital ('13)	Brandon Wu	University of California, Los Angeles	2140	(F) Self-employed (M) Manager	I, FI, PI, CO
	Capital ('14)	Robert Guo	George Washington University	2050	(F) Vice president (M) Human resource	I, FI, PI, TI, CO
	Capital ('14)	Tony Cao	Cornell University	2320	(F) Teacher (M) High school teacher, entrepreneur	I, FI, PI, TI, CO
	Omega ('13)	Mike Hong	McGill University	n/a	(F) Professor (M) Professor	GI
	Pinnacle ('13)	Joe Wu	University of Southern California	2160	(F) Engineer (M) Real estate agent	I, FI, TI

*Note:* Universities have been changed to comparable institutions. Because students have access to this information, I exclude family income information for confidentiality. With the exception of Wenbin Liu's family, all were comfortable paying for a private university in the U.S. I also exclude military and government affiliations for parental anonymity.

\* The exam scores are presented as actual scores in the exam plus additional points.

Admission cutoff scores for PKU or THU is 650 (humanities) and 671 (sciences) in 2013, and 663 (humanities) and 682 (sciences) in 2014.

+ I: Interview, FI: follow-up interview, GI: group interview, PI: parental interview, TI: teacher interview, CO: classroom observation, HO: home observation.



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